# THE Hudson REVIEW

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*Letter from Canada*

***Poems by*** CHARLES MARTIN, WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS, EMILY GROSHOLZ, ROBERT LOUTHAN, MARTHA HOLLANDER.

***Reviews by*** RICHMOND LATTIMORE, MONROE K. SPEARS, GUY DAVENPORT, WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD, VERNON YOUNG, MARVIN MUDRICK, MARCIA B. SIEGEL, ROBERT ASAHINA, CHARLES W. MILLARD, G. E. MURRAY.

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## THESE DISTINGUISHED VOICES SPEAK ON DANIEL HABERMAN'S POETRY

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## To Our Readers

We acknowledge with appreciation a grant of public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts which made possible a 25% increase in authors' fees over one year and also offset production costs for this issue.

A new book by one of the editors of THE HUDSON REVIEW will soon be published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

**FREDERICK MORGAN:** *Northbook.* University of Illinois Press. $10.00; $4.95 paper.

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J. E. CHAMBERLIN

# Letter from Canada

ELIZABETH, QUEEN OF THE UNITED KINGDOM of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, recently announced in her Speech from the Throne to the parliament at Westminster that it could expect to receive a request from Canada to send the British North America Act home. Well, not exactly home. And not exactly the British North America Act. And it was not exactly an announcement. "Other measures will be laid before you." That was it. But even at that, it may have had more elegance, more precision, and perhaps more determination, than the homemade constitution which Canada now proposes.

Canada has never had its very own constitution, but instead has been satisfied with a kind of enabling legislation—creating the dominion and setting out federal and provincial powers, and so forth. This was the British North America Act, which was originally passed in 1867 in London, and it has never been anywhere else, nor anything other than an instrument of the British parliament, though in practice the British have been very kind about passing amendments when requested to do so. In these and other more substantial aspects—along with the fact that it still works—the British North America Act is a remarkably convincing gesture of nineteenth century imperial determination. So it has always been home, right where it belongs. It is Canada that feels astray, and it is Canada that is now determined to write its own Constitution Act. But it doesn't seem to come naturally. Canada *fit non nascitur* . . . made, not born. It was an act of schizophrenic genius that originally fused French and English interests in the New World. Being a thoroughly up-to-date country, fission has replaced fusion as the fashionable mode, and Quebec separatism precipitated this current round of constitutional initiatives.

So this rich orphan, fostered alike by a sense of kin and commerce, has found itself with two choices, two ways of creating a new magic to vitalize itself. It can—to use John Donne's somewhat differently magical alternatives—either arrange for the powers that be to "knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend," or call upon them to "break, blow, burn and make it new." It has chosen the latter, to the consternation of those who prefer tinkering—a Canadian tradition of sorts, I suppose—and to the delight of those who favour transformation, especially if some sort of sanctifying grace will ensure that the country will be the same yet different after it is all over. The prospect, like Keats's belle dame, has enthralled us.

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But there are some difficulties. One is that Sanctifying Grace goes these days by the name of Queen Elizabeth, at least as far as Canada is concerned. An awkward fact. Furthermore, we must ask for blessings on our enterprise, in that we must request the British parliament to act as both belle dame and mother superior, and to transform the British North America Act into a Canadian Constitution Act in a gesture of gratuitous disinterest. It is something like asking permission to be excused to go to the bathroom. "Please, ma'am, I'm urgent." It's all a bit tacky.

The questions that this entire enterprise raises are familiar enough. "Who am I?" Or, in a revision that Northrop Frye applied some years ago to Canadian literature, "Where is here?" More recently, this has taken on the desperation of "How long, O Lord, how long?" The answers are themselves questionable, and Canadians are becoming adept at the ritual absurdity of stepping outside our national house and ringing our national doorbell, and then being surprised to discover nobody at home. It may have something to do with the neighbours. "If not now, when?" That is the question that catches the zealous practicality of the moment, and covers the range of responses of those (such as Prime Minister Trudeau) for whom the exercise has a kind of messianic urgency. Perhaps more to the point is the comic earnestness of one of Derek Walcott's ambiguous statements of West Indian self-consciousness: "Either I'm nobody or I'm a nation." Like Alice wandering Through the Looking Glass, Mr. Trudeau has apparently seen nobody on the road, at some distance too . . . and he is not a man to welcome such sights. So it is a nation we are looking for, an image of ourselves. The Canadian psyche, especially at this time of constitutional change, is unnervingly like that "tremulous wisp constantly reforming itself in the stream" that Walter Pater wrote about, "that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves."

I find something magical in this. The trouble is that it is an essentially Victorian magic, which apparently will no longer do. Constitutions, at their best, compel the energies that make this magic possible, and illuminate like Wallace Stevens' "light on the candle tearing against the wick / To join a hovering excellence." But Canada's latest venture in this field has all the modern magic of fluorescent lighting; its flickering is nothing more than irritating, and its illumination is designed for office buildings, supermarkets and indoor plants. It has been a very depressing time. What could, and what should, have been a process that nourished the mind and the spirit has instead demonstrated nothing more than the impoverishment of our political imaginations . . . our soulless preoccupation with what is reasonable, or what is profitable . . . our inability to transform reality into images of human aspiration.

It is not a new story, of course. At the end of the eighteenth century, at a time when other nations were shaping new constitutions,

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Wordsworth wrote about how "a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor." The world has a way of insisting on itself, of compelling us to accept the terms of its sometimes vicious and always temporary social, economic or political categories, of hypnotizing us into the delusion that its elements are permanent, its priorities immutable. It is this world of realities that intimidates us with its relentless pressures. The only way to resist the pressure of reality is by the pressure of the imagination; the only way to create a civil society is by committing oneself not only to what is happening, but also to what should happen. What is happening is often described by newspapers, which don't know any better; or by social scientists, many of whom seem to be trained as court reporters. What should happen can only be described by those who are willing and able to make distinctions between what a nation wants and does not want, by those who are attentive not only to the situation but also to the destiny and heritage of a people. In some ways, this attention has been paid, and these distinctions have been made; but this is only half of it. These distinctions have to be articulated in a language and embodied in structures which engage the imagination. And the imagination has to be sustained by an ear for such language, and by an eye for such structures. That is why the arts, and especially literature, are so central to the development not just of a national identity but of a national vitality, of the eye and the ear that will recognize that sense of a hovering excellence without which any human community is nothing more than the minimal sum of its parts, or, as in the case of Canada right now, its lowest common denominator. Each age shapes its own language, and establishes its own structures; and what may be central in one time becomes ornamental in another. Canada at present is deeply divided by differences of language and culture, but these are less debilitating than we sometimes assume, for they might (and I think will) provide rich opportunities for new forms of national expression, uneasily ambivalent but capable of imaginative definition and political resolution. What is much more serious is that Canada is deeply divided by different views of what is important and what is unimportant, of what is profound and what is superficial. The constitutional process is typically Canadian in being mesmerized by the problem of how to legitimize itself, by an uncertainty about where its authority lies. What it has in large measure failed to recognize is that its only authority is that of the imagination, an authority of language and structure; instead, it is foolishly committed to the authority of institutional statements and legal designations. The division in the Canadian imagination is in part a division between what is and what is not taken seriously. More fundamentally, it is a division between its voices of nonchalance and its

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voices of intensity, with an almost complete incapacity to achieve some balance between them, some way of enshrining a political language in the new constitution, for example, which has both the glory of nonchalant generalizations and the power of intense particularities. What is absent from this process is any significant juxtaposition of the mutability of human arrangements with the permanence of human aspirations—though its defenders will say that its very inadequacy is a testament to this. But then something more is absent, some sense of an imaginative structure to sustain the contemplation of permanent values in a human perspective. Without such a structure, the nation and its citizens are just as likely as ever to be immobilized by a dumb despair, or (what may be worse) mobilized into a blind fury, and just as unlikely as ever to be able to take control of events in their minds. The nation seems governed by those who indulge in what Coleridge used to call the "solemn humbug" that equates the "commonwealth" with the "commonweal." The values which sustain the human spirit inhere in imaginative forms which display in all their bewildering clarity the paradoxes of human existence, in which the cavalier good fortune of the few is never allowed to separate itself from the relentless and debilitating struggle of the many, and in which the possibilities exist for shaping a society according to images which are humanly ordered rather than haphazardly chaotic, of locating desire and satisfaction together in our experience instead of apart in some kind of alienating and enchanting limbo. What we are offered instead is a system of public lotteries.

One of my neighbours near the farm where I used to live had trouble with his water pump one bitterly cold winter day, and before he was able to fix it the water line to his barn had frozen. He had serious heart trouble at the time. He also had eighty head of feeder cattle, when the beef price was low and he was finishing them for what he hoped would be a better spring market. His wife, who was scheduled for a gall bladder operation and who had severe arthritis in her shoulders, spent the next two months carrying water for the cattle from the house to the barn, a grim distance. I would like to live in a nation in which I would never be unconscious of the struggle of its stubborn nobodies, and in which the ideal excitements of the mind and spirit would be implicated in the realities of its circumstances. I live in a nation which is increasingly structured for the convenience of civil servants and politicians, a nation that is fast becoming a low, newspaper, lawsuit, humdrum country. It should not be happening this way. Exercises in constitution-making cannot do everything, but they should do something other than please the government's lawyers. Otherwise, seeking to mend would certainly be better.

And yet, the exercise that has preoccupied my country this year certainly has its importance. To some Canadians, the British North

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# The Review of Contemporary Fiction

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America Act is an irritating reminder of colonial arrangements; to others, it is simply inconvenient. To most, the entire issue is hugely irrelevant. Or rather, it was so. But some things have happened to concentrate attention on these uncertain "other measures." Canada has always been self-conscious, and has sometimes been anxious, about its commitment to the language, culture and history of both French and English Canadians. (It has also had an intermittent concern about its commitment to the native people of Canada, especially when they seemed to be in the way of national progress.) The original provinces of Upper and Lower Canada (now Ontario and Quebec) provided a convenient political definition of one aspect of Canada's essential, some would say bizarre, dichotomy. (The descriptions were geographical, referring to the St. Lawrence River.) Like many groups that sense that their interests are vulnerable, Quebecois have always had a good memory—the provincial motto is still "je me souviens"—and they recollect a history of marginality sustained by colonial institutions, church as well as state. (The fact that this marginality is continental as well as national works both ways, however, for some argue that the best protection of French Canadian interests is under some sort of Canadian federal umbrella.) The provincial structure, which is complicated by the presence of a significant number of English Canadians in Quebec with a history of settlement going back long before confederation to the British conquest of the French in North America, has been considered by some to be inadequate to accommodate the nationalist aspirations of many French Canadians, most (but by no means all) of whom live in Quebec. The fringe terrorism of one decade, accompanied by a radical rhetoric that demanded freedom for the "white niggers of America," and by such subversive blessings as Charles de Gaulle's "vive le Quebec libre," was replaced by the formulation of a surprisingly popular political party committed to negotiating new arrangements with the rest of Canada, and using the logic of separation supported by the rhetoric of "sovereignty association" as a premise. Americans will no doubt appreciate the neurotic anxiety of many Canadians at this prospect. It is an anxiety which has become even more hysterical than usual in many parts of the country. On the one hand it has turned a perennial resentment (especially in the west) into a vicious mistrust of French Canadians, and on the other hand it has made many English Canadians foolishly deferential to French Canadian federalists who propose specific ways of managing Quebecois ambitions, and who take a rather exclusive view of their responsibility to face the separatist menace. The federal government committed itself to rearrangements which would among other things confirm the special place of Quebec, and of French Canadians, in the national scheme, and entrench the dichotomies that make this country such a unique place. It is a noble enterprise. It has gone off the tracks.

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There is something else, just as distressing. The native people of Canada in theory have a central place in Canadian constitutional affairs, and in practice have been recognized in treaty, legislative and administrative arrangements as having a relationship with the federal government different in kind as well as degree from that of any other group within the country. They have been left to twist in the wind. The interests of the Indian, Metis and Inuit people in Canada have created a complex pattern of distinct obligations on the government that should have provided an opportunity to transcend the depressing and pernicious alternatives of separation or assimilation by which native policy has so long been limited in Canada, and to confirm an imaginative basis for a new sort of pluralism in Canada's social, economic and political arrangements. Nothing of this has taken place. The casual disregard of the native nations, the impetuous isolation of Quebec interests, the atrocious bargaining with women's and other basic rights, make it all very shabby. Instead of trying to achieve constitutional arrangements which would create a balance between the various interests and among the separate jurisdictions, and which would recognize that a perfect balance must necessarily be a precarious balance, Canada seems to have chosen a constitutional scheme with the delicate balance and imaginative appeal of a pile of dirty laundry.

This may be one of history's curses. Another, which Canada has largely escaped, is that absurd daisy-chain of revolutions and civil wars that characterizes more advanced countries. In Earle Birney's lines, "We French, we English, never lost our civil war, / endure it still, a bloodless civil bore; / no wounded lying about, no Whitman wanted. / It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted." The monumental; or the documentary. Canada has specialized in the documentary. The National Film Board, and an increasing number of other Canadian filmmakers, continue to do fine work in this mode, and some of the most interesting recent theatre in Canada has done so as well (such as James Reaney's Donnelly trilogy: *Sticks and Stones, The St. Nicholas Hotel* and *Handcuffs*). But the urge to create the monumental is of course there also. I think that the best painting and writing of the past few years has been work that relishes its precarious balance, its impulse for both the monumental and the documentary, for both the romantic and the realistic. Canada's strength is its anomalous character, its cordilleran imperviousness. The mode of our most engaging literature is neither heroic nor anti-heroic, neither visionary nor revisionary, but what might be called palaeological, a layered fiction which at its best is inspired by the public or private muse—"the fossil is pure memory," as the poet Christopher Dewdney has insisted—and at its worst is prompted by a kind of composting instinct. Sometimes at its best, too, for it is implicated in an attempt to insinuate something of a steamy tropical ripeness into our half frozen northern land.

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"To become aware of our history is to become aware of our originality." The truth of this assertion by Octavio Paz is, however, a fugitive one, for a search for origins is anything but original unless the search has a kind of magical success. And yet, maybe it is successful anyway, as with Seamus Heaney's consolation at the end of his journey back: "Out there in Jutland / In the old man-killing parishes / I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home." Or Al Purdy, in "The Country North of Belleville":

> this is the country of defeat
> where Sisyphus rolls a big stone
> year after year up the ancient hills
> picnicking glaciers have left strewn
> with centuries' rubble
> days in the sun
> when realization seeps slow in the mind
> without grandeur or self deception in
> noble struggle
> of being a fool

Some years ago, I heard Purdy and Heaney read together in the same short evening at an international poetry festival held here in Toronto. At the time, the contrast between Heaney's fine subtlety and Purdy's usual bombast seemed to me excruciating; but perhaps there was more to their conjunction than I realized. Heaney referred recently to the conflict between the imperatives of territorial piety and of imperial power. Although his reference was specifically to Northern Ireland, and to its troubles, it seems to me that there is a meaning here for our Canadian situation. The constitutional exercise is typical in its focus on ways to designate forms of power rather than on ways to sustain forms of piety.

Our best fiction has something of this piety, focussed often in a precisely regional manner—from such writers as Jack Hodgins on the west coast (in the collection of short stories entitled *Spit Delaney's Island,* for example, and novels such as *The Invention of the World*) or the fine prairie story teller Rudy Wiebe, who has produced a considerable range of work, of which his novel *The Scorched-Wood People* is probably the best—developed in patterns of disintegrating discontinuity, that layered composting quality once again. The worst fiction steams away cheerfully or depressingly, but uselessly, like Frost's wood pile without the lively bird. Robertson Davies and Margaret Atwood are writing more, but I am enjoying them less; while other writers such as Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant continue to write in a way that at least approaches the high level of Laurence's *The Stone Angel,* or Munro's and Gallant's best short stories. Timothy Findley (*The Wars*) is developing an individual style; and Mordechai Richler gets more entertaining. Although

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some of the poetry of the recent past capitulates to the psychological or social reality which it intends to celebrate, so that its aspect is at times—even at its most assertive moments—depressingly cringing, there is certainly some fine work being done in Canada at present, of which the poetry and fiction of Michael Ondaatje is I think the most interesting. Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* sustain compelling tensions between the lovely and the grotesque—*The Dainty Monsters* and *Rat Jelly* are the titles of two of his early books of poetry. *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* is the most recent volume of his selected poems. Canada has been very fortunate in becoming home to several distinguished writers in exile from the miseries of Eastern European censorship. There is the Hungarian poet George Faludy; and the Czech writer and filmmaker Josef Skvorecky, who is completing a book on Dvořák, and has written a new novel which will be coming out soon under the title *The Engineer of Human Souls.* Some of the French Canadian writers have a convincing imaginative authority; I sense, however, a distance between us which is much more than a question of language, or of my ignorance.

While generalizations may be idiotic, I think a shy deference may be worse. Nobody can choose the poet's subject, not even the poet; and the nation decides the politician's. Both seem to me in danger of bartering their prerogatives; both are too easily satisfied with impoverished language and with structures of temporary convenience. Some things are hopeless, of course; even Ezra Pound could not make a poetical structure of social credit, one of Canada's contributions to a divine political comedy. Roland Barthes compared literature to phosphorus, burning brightest at the point of disintegration. He had something else in mind, but perhaps there is comfort in this anyway.

Some of the best writing of the past while has been non-fiction. Again, it tends to be written on or about the edges, the margins, the borders, where vision and design are themselves implicated in that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of the self. Hugh Brody has a new book on the stubbornly and in some respects invisibly persistent Indian hunting societies of the northeast of British Columbia, called *Maps and Dreams.* George Calef's book on *Caribou and the Barren Lands* brings a new and richly complex focus to Canadian photography, which has long been notable. And Thomas Berger, the judge who conducted the most significant of recent inquiries into the relationship between northern development (in particular pipelines) and the native people, has written a book on human and specifically minority rights and dissent in Canada, *Fragile Freedoms,* which takes as its theme the notion that no citizen's rights can be greater than those of the least protected group, and as its epigraph a quotation from the distinguished Canadian poet, and one of its greatest constitutional lawyers, F. R. Scott: "If human rights and

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harmonious relations between cultures are forms of the beautiful, then the state is a work of art that is never finished." Perhaps it has a too floridly sentimental quality about it. Another quotation, from another (though somewhat differently) distinguished Canadian, the late C. D. Howe, might catch my mood more exactly. "If you can't win an argument, always leave with a grievance."

As I write this, I am getting ready to fly west, over the country my grandfather settled in, the country of the western Canadian plains, at a time when hunters were replaced by herders, wooded coulees became cattle wallows, and Louis Riel was hanged for treason. While he profited from the coming of ranching and the railroad, my grandfather condemned the way the government treated Riel. This was the ambiguous logic of western self-determination, a notion of sovereignty association that had for a brief moment the promise of fusing native and non-native aspirations in new social, economic and political structures. Canada lost an opportunity to take advantage of the very ambivalence which bewildered it. It is about to lose another opportunity, not nearly as dramatically, but in a way appropriate to the mind-numbing platitudinous abstractions of the 1980s.

When I land, it will be in British Columbia, where I grew up overshadowed by cedars, the great cedar stands of the rain forests and coastal islands and inlets. In fact, the trees I remember were cedars and cypresses, or red cedars and yellow cedars as they were called, and they were a lurking, lumbering presence. They were also, in their brooding mysterious dominion, a presence that defended the imagination against the tyranny of grievances and grumpiness. They haunted my mind, caught up in the images of Emily Carr, and they do so still.

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PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS

# In Praise of Gossip

"Don't gossip," my mother used to say. Or alternately: "If you can't say something good about a person, don't say anything at all."

The two injunctions implied one another. Gossip, back in my childhood, meant malice; it dabbled in the forbidden. Everyone else's mother said the same things. Some mothers gossiped themselves, while warning their daughters away; others abstained. Women tell of their mothers' lengthy, inaudible telephone conversations with female friends, of satisfied smiles in the aftermath. "What did you talk about?" a girl might ask. "Oh, nothing, really . . . ": a non-answer epitomizing the mystery of adulthood. Holiday gatherings, in those mythical times, felt rich in their shared detail about the absent: family gossip. Yet we all knew and know: we're not supposed to do it, even—or especially—if we enjoy it.

But perhaps we enjoy it for good reasons. Some people have thought so (I certainly do); it is worth ruminating about why, about how gossip has been perceived, and how it feels, and what purposes it serves. "I don't call it gossip," says a character in a 1978 novel by Laurie Colwin. "I call it 'emotional speculation.' " Such re-naming attempts to evade negative associations clustering around the word, a word with a vexed history. Definitions of gossip often illuminate the definer more than the object of consideration.

In its original meaning, *gossip* implied no gender; it meant "godparent," of either sex. Its increasingly degraded connotations follow its intensifying association with women. By the mid-eighteenth century, Dr. Johnson could offer three definitions:

1. One who answers for the child in baptism.
2. A tippling companion.
3. One who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in.

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The third meaning foretells the future, with its faintly resentful tone about female mysteries, its emphasis on the trivial, on secrecy (from men specifically, those beings excluded from the ceremony of lying-in), and on feminine bonding.

The definition also suggests ways in which men have defended themselves from the dangers they imagine in female talk: by denial and contempt, contempt conveyed in the dismissive verbs, denial in the refusal to grant significance. The hidden life of women, rarely onstage, always whispering in the wings, can frighten those who do not share it. What secrets do they tell one another, what power do they conceal?

Those who would rescue the idea of gossip have often tried to redefine it. A rapid survey of apologists may map ground to stand on. Such apologists insistently exclude malice: an early nineteenth-century periodical defiantly or defensively called *The Gossip,* for example, insists that malice marks slander, not gossip. They may emphasize the value of the data which gossip preserves. Julia Byrne, in a work published in 1892, argues that "*all* gossip is not necessarily frivolous, nor need it be malicious"—a comment which of course reflects her awareness of deprecating common assumption. She continues, however, to offer a more powerful justification. "History owes most of what little truth it contains, to the gossip of diarists and annotators as well as to the intimate confidences of friendly correspondence, and notwithstanding the necessarily trifling details of these private effusions and the *banalités* with which they often abound, the sidelights of such records have become invaluable to the groping student of past times, and of departed humanity; nor can we possess too many such chronicles." The writer implicitly assumes that the truth of history resides in particularity: a debatable proposition. A male defender writing at about the same time, Henry Morley, describes and defines gossip in ways which claim its attractiveness as well as its importance. "Gossip is in its tone familiar, in its matter very often personal, and always quick in passing from one subject to another. At the root of it, say etymologists, there lies an honest Saxon meaning—'God's sib'—'of one kindred under God.'" This somewhat disingenuous argument prefaces a miscellaneous collection of essays called *Gossip,* essays unified only by their personal interest to the

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writer; for him too, gossip evidently links itself with the concerns of the individual.

We need not feel surprised that defenses sound defensive. These, however, strike a special note—a response to the devious nature of the implied opposition. Gossip's connection with malice, trivia, lack of seriousness belongs to the realm of assumption for practitioners of the mode as well as for critics, even when they declare the falsity of the linkage. Practitioners and critics, indeed, are often the same. Few gossip without guilt, few defend without ambivalence.

Yet gossip has value, both social and individual. Sociologists and anthropologists have specified purposes it serves in various kinds of society. Thus the anthropologist Robert Paine, in an essay entitled "What Is Gossip About?," claims to have "no *a priori* assumption that gossip of itself either avoids conflict or exacerbates it, that it brings people together or pushes them into opposing factions. . . . On the other hand, I think it can be demonstrated that gossip is a catalyst of social process. . . . In this sense, it may be held that gossip serves to pattern issues which were but vaguely or confusedly perceived by a local population." Although an occasional social scientist argues the importance of gossip for the individual participant, such thinkers more typically insist on social meaning. "What an individual gossips about and how in that gossiping he gratifies his emotions or serves his self-interest, cannot be explained solely by reference to him."

This emphasis on the social, characteristic of most printed discussion of gossip, directs attention to a paradox implicit in efforts to explore the subject. Gossip itself eschews the general. Efforts to explain it necessarily generalize. The incongruity between the language of the genre and that in which it must be explicated weakens cases made for it. To explain what's rewarding in gossip, like efforts to elucidate what's funny in a joke, risks destroying what the explanation purports to clarify.

Nonetheless, I propose to join the company of explainers.

To begin with the obvious: men as well as women gossip. Both sexes acknowledge this fact, men with an air of large concession ("even we sometimes indulge in this foolish female activity"), women with defensive or aggressive energy ("men

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do it too, it can't be so bad"). But the fact of male participation does not weaken the tenacious link between the female and this conversational mode. The term "male gossip," as a designation of a person, sounds contemptuous, just short of an unfriendly accusation of homosexuality. The term "female gossip" hardly exists: the noun now assumes gender—not only because women gossip, but, more importantly, because gossip is the *sort* of thing women do.

Male philosophers shed light on this matter, although they do not explicitly associate gossip with women. For both Kierkegaard and Heidegger, gossip typifies inauthentic discourse. Kierkegaard's account belongs to a series of observations on the evils of the present age, an historical epoch of diminished spiritual substance. His description of gossip carries a heavy weight of negative judgment:

> Mere gossip anticipates real talk. . . . When people's attention is no longer turned inwards, when they are no longer satisfied with their own inner religious lives, but turn to others and to things outside themselves, . . . when nothing important ever happens to gather the threads of life together with the finality of a catastrophe: that is the time for talkativeness. . . . People who are talkative certainly chatter away about something and, indeed, their one wish is to have an excuse for more gossip, but the subject is non-existent from the ideal point of view. It always consists of some trivial fact such as that Mr. Marsden is engaged and has given his fiancée a Persian shawl. . . . If we could suppose for a moment that there was a law which did not forbid people talking, but simply ordered that everything that was spoken about should be treated as though it had happened fifty years ago, the gossips would be done for, they would be in despair. On the other hand, it would not really interfere with any one who could really talk.

"From the ideal point of view," gossip can provide few justifications for itself. Heidegger says essentially the same thing, although he begins by claiming no " 'disparaging' signification" for the term (*Gerede*) translated as "gossip" or "idle talk." His elaboration does not support this assertion. "The groundlessness of idle talk is no obstacle to its becoming public, instead it encourages this. Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own. . . . Idle talk is something which anyone can rake

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up; it not only releases one from the task of genuinely understanding, but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility, for which nothing is closed off any longer." Gossip occurs in writing as well as speech, Heidegger says, and the average reader will have difficulty discriminating it from more meaningful forms of assertion. "The average understanding of the reader will *never be able* to decide what has been drawn from primordial sources with a struggle and how much is just gossip." Discourse "is the way in which we articulate 'significantly' the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world," but gossip perverts this function by ignoring its crucial terms: gossip concerns neither true "intelligibility" nor true "Being-in-the-world."

Between them the two philosophers articulate at a high level traditional ground for disparagement of gossip, neglecting only the matter of malice. Gossip, as they describe it, opposes "real talk," concerns the superficial and external, involves trivia, implies no struggle for understanding. Anyone can do it. It represents an obstacle rather than a means to communication.

One may agree that the world needs modes of talk besides gossip, yet still question the grounds of judgment in these accounts. I think of Freud's famous summary of the difference between the male and female superego. For reasons which he specifies, the male superego develops, he says, to a higher degree. Consequently, men and women conduct their moral lives in different ways; women prove far less capable of impersonal and abstract considerations, more vulnerable to the claims of the individual situation. If one penetrates beneath the value-laden terminology, Freud's description delineates with considerable accuracy two opposed modes of dealing with problems of moral judgment. Only by privileging the abstract, general, and theoretical over the concrete, specific, and personal does male superiority become self-evident. Just so with Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Both assume the high value of generalizable truth (the conclusions that can be drawn from what happened more than fifty years ago) and the low value of specific detail. From their assumptions stem their conclusions: gossip emerges from minds not seriously engaged, from inferior states of culture.

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How necessary are the assumptions? Perhaps gossip shouldn't be considered a mode of "discourse" at all. People discourse *to* one another; they gossip *with*. Communication, Heidegger suggests, constitutes an end or purpose of discourse; it provides the means of gossip. One discourses from a height, gossips around the kitchen table. Why value platforms to the exclusion of rocking chairs? We need not reject discourse in its concern with large truth, but we might acknowledge also—as the philosophers do not—the revelatory power of the small, shared truth.

Catherine Morland, in *Northanger Abbey,* confesses to her lover-mentor her distaste for history. "I read it a little as a duty," she says, "but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome." Henry Tilney, of course, rebukes and finally silences her, assuming rather than arguing the significance of historical narrative and asserting his own moral superiority in his comment that Catherine does not "altogether seem particularly friendly to very severe, very intense application." Catherine has no language, no concepts, to defend herself against the implicit charges of laziness and ignorance. The value system behind her key critical adjective, *tiresome,* remains unarticulated. Catherine believes that reading should provide pleasure, that ordinary people matter more than important people, that women count as much as men. Henry and the historians appear to believe the opposite. They believe, in other words, that the public matters more than the private; and the public realm belongs to men. (Symbolically if not literally, that statement remains as true of the late twentieth century as of the eighteenth-century world of *Northanger Abbey.* Women inhabit the public realm on male terms.) If the affairs of that realm prove "tiresome," the charge means little to those inhabiting it, who seldom measure the worth of occupations by enjoyment. To imply such a measure convicts Catherine of frivolity; but it also suggests her respect for the life of feeling. Gossip, seldom tiresome to informed participants, might satisfy some of her needs.

In making such a statement, I rest on my own assumptions about what gossip may involve—assumptions which I hope

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soon to clarify. Jane Austen helps toward clarification with an interchange from *Persuasion.* Anne Elliot, the protagonist, has befriended a poor, sick widow, Mrs. Smith, who indicates her moral stature by remaining cheerful in adversity. During one of Anne's visits, Mrs. Smith speaks of her sustaining contacts with Nurse Rooke, who brings reports from the outside world. "Call it gossip if you will; but when nurse Rooke has half an hour's leisure to bestow on me, she is sure to have something to relate that is entertaining and profitable, something that makes one know one's species better." Anne, in her sympathy for her friend, enthusiastically remarks that such women have the opportunity of seeing "all the conflicts and all the sacrifices that ennoble us most," the best of human nature. Mrs. Smith reacts doubtingly. "Here and there, human nature may be great in times of trial, but generally speaking it is its weakness and not its strength that appears in a sick chamber; it is selfishness and impatience rather than generosity and fortitude, that one hears of." The pleasure of Nurse Rooke's gossip, in other words, derives from its recitals of base rather than noble manifestations.

Despite its slightly apologetic tone, Mrs. Smith's defense of gossip articulates important issues. Unlike the sociologist's description of gossip's functions, it emphasizes pleasure as the activity's primary value. It also links pleasure with profit ("entertaining and profitable") in a fashion reminiscent of classic defenses of poetry: literature too unites the sweet and the useful. The usefulness of gossip, like that of literature, in traditional views, depends on its revelations about human motive and action. Gossip, like poetry and fiction, penetrates to the truth of things, reporting not fantasies of human greatness but realities of human pettiness.

For Mrs. Smith, gossip enlarges the world. For women in less confined situations, it does the same thing. A psychoanalyst friend of mine defines it: Gossip is healing talk. Yet Mrs. Smith's tone adumbrates the guilt which almost every participant feels—and not only from fear of social disapproval. Whence the pleasure, the profit, the guilt? The answers to all three questions, I suspect, are much the same, and they chart complex paths of psyche and socialization.

The notion of gossip as healing talk involves radical reimagining of the familiar. It posits, by implication, a wound

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or a sickness: in our time the sickness repeatedly described as characteristic of society—*anomie,* impersonality, rootlessness. It excludes destructiveness as an aspect of gossip, or suggests that even gossip's cruelty has positive functions. It insists on an aim beyond immediate pleasure, and on the importance of that aim. And it suits my purposes far better than social scientists' definitions which delineate the phenomenon in ways which are easy to accept, yet which always somehow miss the point. Thus Robert Heilman, examining the functions of gossip in the social life of an urban synagogue, describes the mode as "a social construction of reality which may or may not be grounded in indubitable fact." More specifically: "It is information about the personal affairs of others, identifies these others by name or in some other unmistakable way, is socially significant only to a specified group of others, and stimulates further gossip." Well, yes. But also no, because the emphasis on the social, the public, obscures another set of possibilities.

The word *gossip* designates two quite different kinds of activity; my immediate interest focuses on only one of them. One sort of gossip has nothing to do with healing talk. It takes place often in a more or less public realm—at upper middle class dinner parties, say, and academic conventions, to say nothing of lunch breaks in factories. Who has been considering what job, who is sleeping with whom, who has just revealed his utter untrustworthiness? Such gossip exists to be circulated. It uses private material for public ends; it confirms Heidegger's point about how "groundlessness" provides no obstacle but rather an encouragement to promulgation. Often malicious, often idly destructive, self-aggrandizing, not infrequently resting on false assertions, gossip of this sort expresses individual envy and aggression and serves purposes of social solidarity as well as transmits often useful information. Most people indulge in it at least occasionally, and they often have reason to feel guilty about it, recognizing the self-serving, frivolous, and potentially destructive aspects of such talk. One would not feel inclined to praise this gossip.

The other kind, the healing kind, may use the same raw materials—who is sleeping with whom and the like—but for different purposes. I think of it as "good gossip"; it consists simply of intimate conversation about other people, people

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not present. Such gossip flourishes only in groups of two or at most three. It takes place in a special tone, a tone defined partly by motives of discovery and expression; it concerns itself with facts or pseudo-facts for the sake of eliciting belief. This is the variety of gossip that women keep secret. Mostly they can't describe it; but also, perhaps, they won't. It is in a sense too important.

The "bad" kind of gossip, the kind most people mean when they use the term casually, presents problems well worth talking about. Novelists have explored them, as have psychologists; moralists have commented on them. Awareness of Peyton Place, however, may obscure the more benign side of gossip. Let us inquire how and why it heals, postponing detailed inquiry into how and why it can hurt.

What does Nurse Rooke really do for Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*? She hardly alleviates the invalid's physical maladies, but she modifies the confined woman's psychic malaise. We may readily imagine the kind of story she tells. She might, for example, report the unexpected pregnancy of a patient, perhaps with commentary on the husband's reaction to it. Such a report, even including the commentary, only begins the process of gossip. Its substance involves the talkers' reactions to nuggets of raw material. Nurse Rooke and Mrs. Smith might discuss, more or less explicitly, the feelings associated with pregnancy at various times of life, the implications of family size, the effect of childbearing on marriage. In their twentieth-century avatars, they could reflect about contraception, child-care, abortion, the possibilities open to women outside the domestic sphere. They would use details of someone else's experience, in other words, to stimulate expression of responses and beliefs through that process Laurie Colwin calls "emotional speculation." And the beliefs they articulated would not necessarily correspond to those they revealed to their husbands, if they had any.

I can offer no evidence for this assertion except personal experience, about which I don't care to be too specific. Private gossip supplies little data for the researcher. Yet it provides a way of *saying* often vital to its participants, a way to express what they care about and how.

Such talk requires time, a reason sometimes alleged for the relative infrequency of intimate gossip among men. Busy

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women I know make time for it, thus often bewildering husbands and lovers who fail to comprehend its necessity. Those who take the time, make the time, for gossip declare allegiance to small personal facts and to the knowledge gained by contemplation of such facts. People and their concerns matter to gossipers, it goes without saying, but the special way in which they matter evolves from belief in small particulars. Gossip defends this belief, always. The other beliefs it embodies and supports differ according to the participants. By talking about the concerns of other people's lives, the talkers grow to understand their own more fully. That shawl Mr. Marsden gave his fiancée, a subject of conversation for which Kierkegaard has only contempt, may yield material for profound speculation. As the linguist Thomas Pavel has pointed out, gossip involves a rudimentary hermeneutic act: interpretation is its essence. The hermeneutic force of gossip—on occasion far beyond the rudimentary—derives from its capacity to move from small to large, from particular to general—and back again. Gossip involves a special mode of knowing, as well as of saying.

Another value always implicit in intimate gossip, and another function it serves, involves the affirmation of alliance. A Rumanian man told me that in his country men gossip a lot, they sit over coffee and discuss in minute detail the happenings of other people's lives. In America, he believes, men do not gossip in the true sense. They are too competitive, he says, they don't understand the healing power of such talk.

Gossip directs competitive feelings outward, toward the absent other, the subject of discussion. For the two or three discussers, it supports comradeship, connection; it enables them to distance, even to deny, their own competitive impulses. They declare their closeness by sharing their secrets, and by investing those secrets with meaning. The sharing involves more than exchange of information. It implies self-revelation as well as exposure of other people's affairs because responses to news matter more than news itself in intimate gossip. By gossiping people know one another.

Or one might say with equal accuracy that they gossip *because* they know one another. Women who move away from a familiar community often report suffering from lack of gossip in their new environment. They don't know what there is to

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talk about, they lack the context of knowledge and acquaintance which situates new information and points its meaning. But they also lack people to talk with. To various degrees, but always a good deal, gossip depends upon and derives from trust. Although one knows (sometimes relies upon) the likelihood that information transmitted in one intimate situation will pass to new hearers in another such situation, the exchange assumes the fundamental fidelity of its participants. They can trust one another to allow room for moral speculation; they can expose to one another their deep beliefs. The patterns of gossip reflect patterns of intimacy. Tomorrow I may gossip with the woman I have just gossiped about, but I will not gossip about my closest friend with someone to whom I feel less firmly attached.

But the account I have just offered suggests also the problematic aspect of even "good" gossip. Such conversation posits and depends upon fidelity and intimacy among its participants, yet in its nature it encourages instability of alliance. Gossip generates immediate temptations. The pleasure and profit of intimate talk may lead the talkers insensibly to betrayal of other alliances, to revealing secrets that should remain untold, to exposing other people's vulnerabilities—not from malice, necessarily; perhaps from excessive involvement in the moment. Gossip's potential for moral insight, which depends on the active participation of its practitioners, implies its moral danger. One risks harm to others, not only to oneself. I will return to this indigestible problem; the negative potential of gossip can only be properly assessed, I believe, in the context of its understood positive power.

That power derives partly from the ways—often harmless—gossip makes use of other people. Such verbal exchange locates its subjects temporarily at a firm distance. Talk about our children, our spouses, even, in most cases, our *ex*-spouses, rarely falls into gossip's modes, although it may share the healing power and some of the pleasure. But gossip does not deal directly with the gossiper's personal problems. If I'm worried because my son appears to be rather too emotionally involved with an unsuitable young woman, my talk about the entanglement has a kind of psychic utility too immediate and straightforward for gossip. Talk about my neighbor's son's similar entanglement, on the other hand, which allows consid-

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eration of the issues with less anxiety about the outcome, may qualify as gossip. The borderlands are murky. It's a certain atmosphere, most of all, that makes gossip recognizable: of intimacy, of gusto, often of surprise and revelation. The atmosphere both marks and encourages friendship.

By its context of freedom and friendship, its opportunity to articulate and to transmit values, its affirmation of alliance and its effective distancing of competititve feelings, gossip generates pleasure. As the atmosphere of secrecy intensifies intimacy, it simultaneously engenders the aura of power: another source of pleasure. "I know something you don't know," children chant, declaring their dominance in their knowledge. Adults too increase their stature by knowledge which excludes others. To know, to tell, to be told: these actions assert dominance.

Of course gossip involves not only facts, but interpretations; not just facts, but facts organized into stories; not just stories, but stories located in private history. Catherine Morland would approve of such history: a record of interpretations preserved mainly by oral tradition, concerning domestic affairs, small events, childbirth rather than war and pestilence, women as much as men. Communities of gossip share these private histories. History—this special kind of oral history—provides the fundamental context for further interpretation. The power of gossipers in a community derives partly from the sense in which they control history.

From the narrower perspective which interests me more, possession of the history provides another form of power in the immediate personal control implicit in it. Knowledge is power, knowledge about other people is power over them, knowledge of the past provides an illusion of predictive possibility and an air of interpretive authority. The interpretations gossip offers inhere in the stories it tells. The organizer of a narrative controls its meaning, thus takes partial possession of other people's lives.

Alliance, secrecy, shared values never proclaimed aloud: these foster collective as well as individual force. Social condemnation of the female activity of lengthy, trivial conversation may reflect anxiety about the dimensions of this power. Dr. Johnson's definition about women at a lying-in stems from the same male nervousness (what's really going on

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there?) reflected in the common instant association, for most men, between gossip and malice. Women tend to associate gossip first with pleasure (although sometimes also with prohibition); men, more often with danger, catty destructive women, schools for scandal. The sense of danger acknowledges the power—power never claimed out loud, never charted. Women only talk, in an ancient stereotype; men *do*. But what possibilities lurk in private talk?

Nonparticipants both perceive and imagine gossip's power, but those who exercise it also feel it. One probably understands it most clearly in its absence: deprivation of pleasure and vague loss of strength when change of scene or some other circumstance eliminates established conversational networks. The complaint, "I have no one to gossip with," speaks of an experience of diminishment, both in the loss of collectivity and the loss of opportunity for self-discovery which reveals to the self its own potency. Gossip's power, as experienced by gossipers, is less sinister but no less strong than that fantasized by outsiders.

Power, values, alliance—to claim such issues as integral to gossip sounds rather too portentous. It ignores the sheer *fun* which for most gossipers explains their involvement: the simple pleasure of companionship, the joy of verbal play, the freedom to exercise and explore the possibilities of wit, to take risks with limited danger. The self-exposures of gossip carry the forbidden joy of exhibitionism; the concern with other people's erotic life provides the thrill of voyeurism. And always gossip supplies the exhilaration of story. As a literary critic I take story very seriously; I also take it seriously as a gossip. By stories, as I have already suggested, we attribute meaning; by stories we declare the sense made by other people's experience and by our own. The organizing activity of gossip has far-reaching implications; it also provides immediate and solid satisfaction. At least at the domestic level we can assert that the things that happen have meaning, form patterns, yield to analysis, and that we have the right to take pleasure in the small concerns of life: even they provide narrative substance.

Every effort to say what it is distances us from the immediate experience of pleasure inherent in gossip as activity. To make large claims for it contradicts gossip's commitment to

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the small. Praising gossip begins to sound rather like praising folly: there must be some irony here somewhere; in the best of all possible worlds surely we wouldn't need gossip. (A novelist friend of mine, on the other hand, argues that in the best of all possible worlds we would need nothing but gossip. Lots of gossip, no wars and pestilence.)

Gossip is healing talk. The sources of pleasure in gossip duplicate the forces of healing. Both large and small claims for this form of verbal action reiterate its capacity to affirm the self. As one discovers one's values, and skill at verbal play, and ability to take risks, and pleasure in sharing, and potential power, one discovers one's self. The healing comes both from what the gossiper does and from what she learns. In the doing, the talking, the story-telling, she encounters her own capacities and experiences her own pleasures. She also learns and relearns what she shares with the rest of humanity. Gossip's obsessive concern with the minute reflects the assumption that most lives compose themselves mainly of minutiae. The more we learn of other lives, the more we learn of our own: another truism from traditional defenses of literature. We have come back again to Mrs. Smith and her delight in encountering vicariously even (or especially) the base aspects of human nature. Gossip heals by allowing us to express who we are, to know the others with whom we talk, to imagine richly those we talk about.

As a social phenomenon, gossip often appears to blunt moral discrimination. I think once more of Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice,* where the voice of the community articulates all Elizabeth's mistaken judgments. *Everyone* says that Darcy is proud, Wickham charming, Bingley agreeable. Elizabeth does not derive her own opinions from the utterance of "everyone," but the communality of gossip helps protect her from the necessity of examining her own convictions until circumstances directly challenge them. Moreover, the social reality of gossip hints its sinister side in the community's eagerness to believe the worst of Wickham, once his flaws begin to show, and to anticipate a dreadful fate for Lydia. As the narrator of *Emma* comments, any young person who marries or dies is sure to be well spoken of: an observation suggesting the blurring effect of communal judgment, communal talk.

For the sensitive individual who participates, on the other

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hand, gossip develops the capacity for moral discrimination. Think of the talk about other people in Henry James (to say nothing of Proust): by endless discussion of how others behave, normative characters develop their own subtle perceptions. As an activity in the world, sustained gossip demands fine discrimination: otherwise, one runs out of things to talk about. The simple facts can hardly sustain interest long. To distinguish between the ways in which two different women conduct their love affairs, on the other hand, to establish distinctions where none appear to exist—such mental and moral exercise refines the palate and strengthens the mind.

Except in my choice of pronouns, I seem to have abandoned the subject of women as intimately connected with that of gossip. All that I have said, however, applies with particular force to the experience of a class largely deprived of social power and filling limited functions in the public world. Those with grander public roles have other ways of forming alliances and exercising power. The nation's leaders proclaim their values from the platform; they need not discover them to one another over the telephone or around the kitchen table. Competition largely governs male lives, in the traditional patterns: no need to direct it toward the absent. Men, stereotypical men, have other outlets for the impulse toward verbal play; they need not interest themselves in the small because they have direct power over the large.

I am, of course, describing a parody version of male experience, but a parody based on common assumptions and established mythology. And the mythic versions of male and female lives are most relevant here. Reality shifts, but history and mythology remain powerful: a history and a mythology, for women, of confined opportunity, narrow physical scope, private rather than public outlets. The values, the pleasures, the rewards of gossip all conform to these stereotypes. Indeed, if one tried to invent a female pastime to provide the greatest possible expressive possibility while remaining bound by rigid social actuality, such a pastime would closely resemble gossip. It can be interpreted as the resource of a deprived class, with its ethos of secrecy, its concealed power, its surreptitious alliances. And its ways of working reiterate ways women typically function.

Gossip proceeds by a rhetoric of inquiry rather than of au-

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thority. "Have you heard . . . ?" the gossiper says. "Don't you think . . . ?" "Do you suppose . . . ?" I recall a conversation about a woman whose love affair with a married man had endured for almost a decade. Why didn't she break with him, we wondered, or demand that he choose between the women in his life? Perhaps, my companion suggested, the unconventional arrangement solved problems otherwise impossible for the career woman. After all, she didn't have to cook dinner for him every evening, she had more control over her time than those with orthodox commitments . . . Our interchange turned into an exploration of the tensions women experience between work and love.

Exploration, indeed, is gossip's mode. It furthers a variety of moral investigation perhaps also typical of women. Inquiries into women's use of language in their writing have begun to suggest that a style based on the tentative and conditional characterizes many female writers—not a style of weakness, but one of peculiarly feminine strength. I heard recently a brilliant paper by Myra Jehlen comparing the first paragraphs of Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* and Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*. It demonstrated how all James's doubling back on himself, his parentheses and qualifications, generated authoritative assertions, whereas Wharton's more straightforward manner in fact established an atmosphere of pervasive doubt. The need to question the given which emerges in Wharton's prose appears also in the dialectic of gossip.

The moral investigation supported by gossip's inquiries proceeds by means of the emphases Freud declared characteristic of women, stress on the personal, particular, and contextual. Recent studies by Carol Gilligan, a psychologist at Harvard, have confirmed the notion that women typically make more contextual ethical decisions than men and that they think first of their responsibilities to others rather than of such abstract principles as justice. Gossip elevates contextuality to a central position and makes other people its subject. It allows women to think about what they appear to value most; it supports the development of fine discriminations growing from concentration on the particular.

Yet the fact remains: to gossip generates guilt. If it encourages subtle thought about other people, it paradoxically involves violation of the cardinal tenet of female morality: care

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for others. It issues from interest in the multifariousness of experience and of human possibility; but it can imply reification of its subject. The pleasures and the profits of gossip, as I have discussed them, all support and affirm and discover the self—but sometimes at cost to others.

Each source of pleasure implies a specific cause for guilt. Secrecy, for example, an essential aspect of gossip's every mode—the secrecy of shared confidences, the secrecy of gossip's pleasure, power, and alliances—secrecy, obviously, implies something to hide. An activity which involves only two or three, which cannot take place in the light of day: such activity must have something wrong about it. Most particularly, the sense of secret power in gossip's interchange often disturbs participants. Whether or not one feels uncomfortable with the idea of power, something distasteful clings about the power which cannot declare itself.

Healing talk for the talker, enlargement of experience; but talk dependent on the manipulation of another by secret use of language. As the conclusions of such talk circulate, they may damage reputations and generate pain. Only by focusing steadily on special aspects of gossip can one celebrate it.

Gossip's alliances also sometimes bear guilt because they reflect hierarchies of intimacy. By choices of whom one will gossip about, whom one will gossip with, one registers often uncomfortable discriminations among people. Gossip says that we like some people better than others, we take some more seriously than others. Even the declaration of values in gossip can generate discomfort, for we may discover in intimate interchange the divergence between what we profess and what we believe. Gossip's self-revelations are often disturbing. We turn out both more harsh and more tolerant than we had anticipated. And many gossipers worry about the apparent trivia that concern them. If we spend so much time talking about unimportant matters, can we really be serious people? Aren't our mothers right?

I no longer sound as though I'm praising gossip. I am, instead, expressing the anxiety most gossipers feel. Part of the anxiety and guilt reflect uncertainty about the validity of the assumptions and values underlying gossip, those values of intimacy and particularity and curiosity about small details. Female values, one might call them—not because males don't

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sometimes share them, but because they have been insistently associated with women, and insistently deprecated. Many who hold them have trouble taking them seriously.

But some of the anxiety stems from what I earlier called the indigestible problem of the real harm gossip may cause. One cannot simply discount this possibility. The fact that gossip may damage others, both by threatening reputations and by converting people into fictions—that fact must be seriously acknowledged. There is nothing to be done about it. Each gossiper must perform her own precarious balancing act between the possibility of harm—harm even when the talkers feel quite free of malice—and the probability of personal enrichment for the gossipers. The trouble is that no clear line divides what I've called "good" gossip from what I've called "bad": they inhabit a continuum. One can slide from one to the other, and then slide back again. To gossip involves a risk to personal integrity as well as to the subjects of the talk. What justifies the risk is the promise of insight, comprehension, and enlargement through an imaginative and judicious activity.

Let me conclude by telling a story. A youngish man—I'll call him Baxter—sets out to spend a summer on Martha's Vineyard. On the ferry to the island he meets a beautiful young woman (Clarissa, let's say), the recently-acquired daughter-in-law of an aggressive middle-aged woman whom he knows well and rather dislikes. Clarissa's husband, it develops, is away on business; her mother-in-law soon leaves. Twice divorced, at loose ends, captivated by Clarissa's unfamiliar beauty, Baxter sets out to seduce the bride. She proves resistant, committed to marital fidelity, suspicious of men, apparently too stupid to find Baxter captivating. Finally, however, he succeeds: he discovers and exploits Clarissa's longing that someone should believe her intelligent, although in fact her incapacity for lucid thought is staggering.

A rather ugly piece of gossip, distanced yet farther by my summary? An elaborated male chauvinist joke? In fact, a short story by John Cheever, "The Chaste Clarissa."

Mary McCarthy and others have noted before the analogies between the material of the novel and that of gossip. I want to push the analogy farther, to inquire why realistic fiction seems so much more respectable than gossip. It goes without saying that fiction supplies aesthetic satisfactions seldom avail-

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able in gossip—but why does reading it not raise comparable moral questions? The Cheever story relies on precisely the kind of substance that makes one feel guilty about gossiping. It deals in the erotic, it uncovers base aspects of human nature, it examines trivia. Its tone partakes of malicious speculation. "From the look on Clarissa's face when he gave her the box of candy, Baxter judged that she liked to get presents. An inexpensive gold bracelet or even a bunch of flowers might do it, he knew, but Baxter was an extremely stingy man, and while he saw the usefulness of a present, he could not bring himself to buy one." While purporting to enter Baxter's mind, these observations convey the narrator's judgment and interpretation. Why doesn't Baxter ply Clarissa with gifts? Because he's so stingy: a gossiper's conclusion, and an ungenerous gossiper at that. The story avoids profound analysis of motive and feeling in favor of interpretation at this rather superficial level. Its charm derives from its resolute preservation of a slightly distant, slightly amused perspective, one which refuses to acknowledge the potential for tragedy in the banal sexual situation.

A critic might condemn this story on literary grounds, as slight, easy, and superficial. But neither critic nor ordinary reader will feel conscious guilt in reading it, any more than John Cheever presumably felt guilt writing it. A good gossiper would probably perceive more meaning in the narrative than does the teller of the written story. Unlike Cheever's narrator, the gossip would understand Clarissa too as a center of consciousness, a woman with feelings and problems despite her apparent lack of intelligence. But to imagine the gossip's reaction implies imagining Baxter and Clarissa as real people. And they aren't: they're only fictions.

A good deal of fiction derives more or less directly from actuality. Clarissa and Baxter may well have existed, under different names; the seduction may have taken place. No matter: the conventions of fiction protect us from guilt by removing us from avowed connection with the real world. " 'Er gossip is so fascinatin', you wish you knew who she was on about," observes that profound philosopher Andy Capp in the comic strip. He too can partake of the pure pleasure of narrative, without the guilt of personality, although he acknowledges the potential enrichment of specificity. Mrs. Capp's accounts and John Cheever's in their fictionality share

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the purification toward which Kierkegaard aspired when he wished that talk about events and people should deal only with matters treated as though they happened more than fifty years ago. Specificity and immediacy contribute to guilt. If the story has nothing to do with anyone we know, better, if it has nothing to do with anyone real—under such circumstances, we can enjoy it with no culpability. Yet the immediacy and reality of gossip's material often generate deeper humanity, more penetrating analysis than one finds in any but the best fiction: the moral risks of gossip accompany real moral possibility.

Perhaps, too, the guiltlessness of reading fiction bears some relation to the lack of human interchange in the transaction. Gossip takes place between people; reading occurs in solitude. The act of reading involves two people, reader and writer, but their connection has been made bloodless. The possibilities for challenge and revision remain limited. No one looks in anyone else's eyes.

"Poetry makes nothing happen": a debatable proposition. Those of us who spend our professional lives thinking about poetry believe that it makes a great deal happen in the mind and heart—where gossip also makes things happen. But the rhetorical claim that poetry has no effect in the world privileges it and protects it from culpability. Gossip can arrogate no such privilege, no such protection: we who engage in it fear its possible consequences beyond ourselves. On the other hand, the opprobrium attached to even the most intimate and fulfilling gossip bears little proportion to the actual harm caused. Does gossip embody female magic? I suspect it does (I mean something good by that), and I suspect men think it does (meaning something bad). Yet it can be argued that it embodies, more importantly, the distinctively human. A final excerpt from the 1821 essay in *The Gossip* makes the point. "We are all gossips by nature. Why do men associate? Some say it is owing to our weakness, and our wants, but it would be more correct to attribute it to the delights afforded us by the sound of the human voice. . . . Those only who amuse, amend, and instruct others, are really wise and pious." Gossips look in each other's eyes, listen to each other's voices, amuse, amend, and instruct each other. Their magic is wise and pious: worthy of non-ironic praise.

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LAURENCE LIEBERMAN

# Kashikojima: The Grave Rubbings

for Laurence Donovan and Dee Clark

Perched on one
leg, pale egret atop a rock,
arms outstretched
for balance—less bird than scarecrow!—
I hover on the summit of Kashikojima Bluff, and praise
the late, indolent ruddy sun,
squat pomegranate poised over Ago Bay. . . .
The children, long since
drifted off with their mother, meandering
to a downhill plateau—
their zealot voices, echoed in the distant gulch, break
into my reverie . . .
I scan two or three pine groves
stratified on the downslope
beneath my hilltop ledge, hunting their plaids
and colorful stripes; absently, I
focus nearer, and catch a glimpse of three backs—figures
lying face-down, scattered
on a wide ridge
directly below: they look
so close, spied

through field glasses, I feel as if I can place
the flat of my hand between my son's
shoulder blades (he nearest, stationed
just under my lookout—I lean and sway,
neck stretched over the mesa edge for the view) . . .

Each child, prone
to a flat slab, limbs sprawled
in various postures:
the boy leaning on one elbow,
one of the girls supported, tripodlike, on left knee, left
elbow and right sneaker sole,
she swings her free arm from side to side,
a stroking motion—
all three children are kneading

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(with some tool or other?)
on the rough surface under their legs and thighs. . . . I proceed
down the path
advancing toward them, keeping
the glasses focussed
on their labors, noting—in semiprofile—
they straddle wide sheets of paper,
no foolscap but firm-textured quality leaves of drafting bond
begged and secured from mom's
favorite sketchbook,
black handprint smudges on Isaac's
chin and temple,

long smear across his forehead—telltale splotches!
They wield soft sticks of charcoal, brittle
and crumbly, black flakes of Carla's stub
of snapped char-stick spotting her skirt-
hem like soot, or dye, small chunks flying away

from her clenched
hand as she scrawls . . . *bits*
*of hard ash spat*
*from embers, or hickory coals*
*ablaze*. . . . They cannot be sketching freehand likenesses
of local flora, game
or wildlife, since they never raise their eyes
to check out a model,
nor take the measure or scale
of a subject. Strokes—
drudgelike!—are drawn in a to-and-fro plodding rhythm.
Long sweeping lines.
No pauses for accuracy or sharpness
of detail. Pressure
constant, tempo unvaried, their brusque moves
a motion of polishing or sandpaper
scraping—more the act of one smoothing rough surface
than suave strokes of Creator
of Life Studies.
*Semicircular wavings. Systole.*
*Diastole.*

*The heartbeat of windshield wipers. Oh my angels,*
*my creative brood!* At last, I pop
the question. "Rubbings, Dad," in chorus
comes the reply. "We're doing rubbings
of tombstone art, story-pictures of local sights . . . "

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I survey
the wide oval cliff-recess:
half of the chosen
acreage, city-zoned, is hidden
under cliff-overhang; the other half a wide plateau-ledge
visible from my former lookout
vantage, above; outer limits marked by two
high red Torii gates,
towering in front and rear, shaped—
I always fancy!—
like colossal models of the Greek letter *pi*. This haven,
adorned with scattered
statuary, is less a graveyard
than open-air museum,
the handful of headstones memorial sculptures—
a few, statues of civic heroes
or saints in local town history. The stone monuments comprise
two pentagons, one octagon, three
wavy ellipses curled
like Calder mobile hangings,
any number

of long rectangles, a few upended to heights
of ten or twelve feet, most lying flat;
two towering figure Ls; one Mitsu-
bishi emblem: three triangles spaced
in a circle, each triangular concrete block

welded to the two
others by lengths of steel tubing;
one high pyramid
perhaps at dead center of the grounds:
the two-dozen-odd steps to the top shelf, thick slabs
of concrete, are graduated in size
from twenty-foot-square base to platform apex
affording footroom
(with little space to spare!) for two
of my junior clan
who, having raced each other to the peak from opposite sides,
are now pushing
and shoving in a king-of-the-castle
contest. Each, claiming
sole possession of the castle keep, tries
to drive the other from the tower
fortress. Scaling the pyramid steps before I can devise
apt verbal threats to fit
the occasion's hazard,

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I descend, two turncoats clasped
by scruff of neck . . .

Older sister, aloof from ruffianly sibling
squabbles, persists in her rubbings,
crowding into a single wide sheet
of drawing paper a carnival
of images transcribed from many tombstones,

in succession.
A wiry she-goat scuttling
on all fours
across the flat-topped octagon, she hops
from one to another of three conjoined Mitsubishi triangles,
winding around the rim of an S-
shaped ellipse; now balancing on the narrow base
of an L, arms
and abdomen draped around the edge
of tall L-throneback.
Scouting for rare finds, she fills the curled page margins
with exact replicas
of script *hiragana* and *katakana,*
Japanese alphabets,
each a handsomely detailed total portrait
in its own right, much-curlicued,
derived from Chinese ideograms. The perimeters of her page
are neatly crammed (she ever
the orderly child,
obsessed by tidiness to a fault?)
with lined-up rows

of characters—each coupling two or more pictures
into a single alphabet. The page
corners and foot-wide borders are stamped
with large line drawings of local shrines,
historic belfry, pagoda, and temple buildings,

a few sites
instantly recalled from our one *un*guided
quick tour through town,
the upright originals we'd passed
much simplified in the few lines and spare markings of grave-
stone embossments . . . Now she moves
by design—as if following a charted itinerary
through hallowed grounds
of the classic dead heroes and ancestors—

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to the tallest rectangle.
Holding her work-in-progress up high against erect marble
with one hand—
palm pressed flat, she starts marking
and shading with the other.
Tranced, she works over a large raised portrait
jutting out from the surface—embossed
to thicknesses of a half-inch, or more, details textured,
acute (or so I discern, standing behind
the budding portraitist—
not making a sound, but peering
over her shoulder) . . .

Eyes luminous, she is filling out a large center-
piece of her canvas, the empty space—
a wide circle she left in the middle—saved
for a select masterwork; many smaller
rubbings distributed around the vacancy, a few

squeezed so close
edges touch, or corners overlap.
Alert to audience,
she slows her pace, finds means
to control the balance of lights and darks in her shading,
holding the full length of char-stick
sidewise—flat to the page—for lightening. She marks
with short quick sweeps
of the chalk's blunt end, etching
succinct dots and stripes
free of fuzzy smears. She is developing style, a fine art
of rubbings! But the spiel
she gabbles to her eavesdropper parent—
palaver of truisms—dissects
expertise at rubbings, as if she'd foreknown
the whole repertory of skills.
Yet I can read the glut of discovery in her eyes: surprises
of touch, her fingertips' supple finds—
sensory illuminings!
Response to sudden caprices
of medium. Flarings-

out of a new intelligence gushing into handprint
whorls, wrist-reflexes, fingerjoints:
a chalk flattened against digit knuckles
slides into wispier flourishes (arcs
and swirls that adorn light shadings) than finger-

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ends afford;
extended index finger guiding
long line-sweeps
better than leading thumb.
This miracle of mating handrhythms to medium is *her being* now,
this new artifice she rolls
and slicks over the page. *The moves starting up*
*from her hip and spine*
*as she dances flowing brush-strokes*
*of the soft powder-stick*
*into the midsection of granite. Or shoulder-floats and dips*
*her downstroke*
*into the solar plexus of limestone.*
*Or hip-swivels and grinds*
*her side-winding cross-stroke into lumbar vertebra*
*of a little rich marble column,*
*with only the flat thin sheet of wood pulp epidermis gliding*
*between her pale smooth skin*
*and coarse hewn rough*
*stone skins of the lurking beneath*
*grand dead,*

*their body's last gristle and integument sighing*
*back to half-breath in her sneeze primed*
*by wind-blown black chalkdust snuff*
*or tickly pollen. . . .* No way did a father's
gift, last birthday, of rudimentary homearts paint

kit prepare her
for outdoorsarts of tombstone
massage and rubdown:
"No talent, and no art, Dad. That no-win
toy . . . " Dimestore number-map paintings. Rote sloppings-on
of pigments. You follow strict equatings
of number-blocks to prescribed colors. No color
blends allowed. Fit numbers
to colors, colors to numbers. Pat
match-ups, all . . .
*Her secret.* She lifts her eyes, often, as if seeking hints
for this scenic rubbing
beyond the high squared limestone death
tablet she labors over,
and beyond, even, this cliff-ledge graveyard
(part recessed tabernacle, part
broad mesa)—a distant reference point to which she returns,
again and again, as to touchstone
for testing details

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of the incomplete rubbing: a rock-
studded seascape

(the exact contents of the scene eluding me,
prior to this moment—now the broad
outline emerges intact, at last!) . . .
She tries to hide her stolen glimpses,
furtive. *Tossing her long bangs out of her eyes?*

*Or easing a neck-*
*quirk?* But these gestures are faked.
I can decipher her far-
to-near pattern of squints:
following each half-veiled stare in the distance, she reworks
hairsbreadth fine details of wrought
charcoal. . . . So I study the scene portrayed,
both familiar and strange—
it depicts a classic sunrise at sea,
the sun's opulence
wedging a cleft between two huge whaleback-shaped rocks
closely juxtaposed,
a narrow strait, or channel, flowing
between them. The true sun—
at this moment setting behind us—casts
an ashy vermillion glow
over the many sky-piercing memorial stones, silhouetted
on sea and cliff-backdrop.
She never looks back
over her shoulder, whether to glare
at the parent-spy

crowding her easel-stance and blocking the last light,
or to steal views of the broad prospect
of sunset on the opalescent sea-tract
at our backs. No model of the sun
(in ascent *or* descent) having caught her eye, I search

the anterior skyline
horizon for images, images to match
her secret borrowings
and glosses on the original *text*
of the nature-study in raised relief on the tall stone's face . . .
*Ah, beautiful thieveries!* The wedded
rocks of Futami spring into view, just visible
above the high left scarp
overhead—lurking a little outside
my line of vision

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while I hung suspended, fluttering over the able draughtswoman's
locks. Now, stooping
to inspect minute details of her craft,
I find myself sharing
a far corner of her perspective, the stark view
of Futami dodging into my vista.
I follow the long thick straw rope across its hammocklike swoop
and suspension from a topmost front edge
of the high rock-island's
slanted cone to the egg-shaped crag
of the lower isle,

and I insert a mental picture of the famous sunrise,
the squash-colored vast disc passing upward
between the rocks, filling the cleavage
(cork stopper in bottle top), as in Carla's
near-to-finished rubbing of Futami. *The top arc*

*of fireball*
*in ascension is stalled parallel*
*to a wooden Torii's foot—*
*the great tall pi-shaped cypress tower*
*anchored to the large island's peak, lording its full height*
*over the sun in stasis of art's deep-*
*freeze. The slack straw rope, bisecting the solar*
*orb (a drooped ring*
*of Saturn?), marries Futami's two rocks;*
*the tattered annual yoke*
*replaced with great ceremony each January 5, those rock-island*
*mates symbols*
*of Japan's two mythic creators—*
*Izanagi and Izanami. . . .*
How well she knows she improves on the engraver's
handiwork! Hurrying now, she races
the dimming light, conserves the last sun strong enough to work by
(mirroring the mind of the scene
portrayed, she'd freeze
Sol dead in his celestial tracks
for the half hour

it may take her to finish) . . . Now adding frayed straggle-
ends to the rope, and daubing traces of halo
aura to the rock-island crowns, she conjures up
flickerings of the haunted presences
of myth trapped incarnate in the sea-whipped rocks. . . .

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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

# The Count and the Princess

Count Peter Kinski had of course dropped the title from his name when he came to live in the United States at the age of twenty-two. But he had never quite succeeded in dropping the idea of himself as an aristocrat; and while his own stay in America was now more than three decades long, and he had become an American citizen, he continued to think himself a visitor. Perhaps visitor-observer would be more precise, for Count Kinski fancied himself rather in the tradition of those other aristocratic observers of America, Tocqueville and Lord Bryce. (Although he had not yet actually written a line of it, for the past eight years he had been gathering material for a work he had tentatively entitled "America in Her Decline.") Yet unlike either Tocqueville or Bryce, Count Kinski was tossed by circumstances into the chirring of local life—in the City of Chicago, of all places—riding buses and subways, shopping for and preparing his own meals, paying bills and earning money to pay them by teaching political theory at a city college on the northwest side. The Count alternated in his feelings about all this: sometimes he felt an almost unbearable bitterness because he had to undergo such indignities; but sometimes he felt proud because he had been able to survive them.

Certainly he had not been born for such a life. His childhood had been spent on the family estate, seventy kilometers to the south of Lodz, where he was brought up by various French governesses and educated by his tutor, a German Tolstoyan, Herr Kügler, in foreign languages, rudimentary science, and history. Before the Nazis swept through Poland, he had been sent off to school in Switzerland. He returned briefly—oh, so briefly—at the end of the war to the world he had known of large hunting parties, a household staff of more

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than twenty servants, and his father's, the old Count's, life of leisurely elegance. But no sooner had he begun to settle into the life for which he was intended than the Communists had taken over Poland. Although an aristocrat, the old Count was a liberal in politics and a Westerner in culture—exactly the sort of man the new regime wished to remove. Peter and his mother were packed off to Paris, where they installed themselves in the Ritz, there later to be joined by his father. But before he could join them, his father, under the strain of this, his second reversal of fortune, died of a heart attack. Peter (now Count) Kinski and his mother were left stranded at the Ritz, with very little money and only the jewelry she had managed to smuggle out of Poland at their departure.

Between them Peter and his mother decided upon an academic career for him. He enrolled as a doctoral candidate in political philosophy at the University of Chicago. The plan was for him to go off to America first. His mother would remain in Europe, in the hope of salvaging something from the family's latest disaster. But it came to nothing, and before she could join her son Countess Kinski suffered a stroke, and died less than two weeks later. One of the Kinski family's agents sent on the money her jewelry had fetched to Peter—some $16,000 in American currency. She was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery. Peter never knew where his father was buried, or if he was buried at all. An only child, he was the last of his line, the final Count Kinski of a family that traced its descent back to the thirteenth century.

Even at the University of Chicago, that most cosmopolitan of American universities, he was an oddity. In an otherwise bohemian graduate student setting, he wore suits of an English cut, carried a walking stick, read Proust. He lived alone at International House, among students from India and Nigeria and veterans from World War Two on the GI Bill. He studied under Leo Straus, and chose an ambitious dissertation on Thucydides and the origins of totalitarianism in Sparta. It was a dissertation he was never to finish, for before it was really underway his money had all but run out, and he was forced to take a teaching job at the school at which he had now been teaching for more than twenty years.

After leaving the University of Chicago the Count moved

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to the somewhat rundown Chicago neighborhood called Rogers Park. He rented a one-bedroom apartment in an older building on Pratt Avenue less than a block from Lake Michigan. Slowly he acquired furniture, bought many books, a few good rugs. When his English clothes wore out, he bought American ones that roughly—rather too roughly for his taste—approximated them. His only palpable evidence of his old life was four undershirts, with the Kinski family crest sewn into them by Panushka, an elderly family maid who had helped to raise him as a child; these he kept in a bottom drawer of a mahogany chiffonier he had purchased at a Salvation Army store.

Living among his books and pipes, taking the El and then a bus to the college three days each week, cooking his meals, the ingredients for which he bought at a locally famous German delicatessen called Kuhn's, he somehow reached his fiftieth year. He had grown heavier and lost much of his hair. He still caried his walking stick. He read, attended the Chicago Symphony downtown, went occasionally to the movies, kept no television set nor ever learned to drive a car. By carefully husbanding his salary—he taught most summers; what else was there for him to do?—he was able to afford himself a holiday in Europe once every four or five years, where he could speak the French and German that had never left him. Christmas Eves he took himself, with the aid of the El and two buses, to a Polish restaurant in the suburb of Berwyn, where he ate a traditional meal of duck and dumplings and spoke Polish with the owners.

At the college he made no real friends. When he first arrived there an attempt had been made to throw him together with a teacher of Russian, also an emigré, named Dimitri Suslovich, who spoke Russian with an atrocious Ukrainian accent. To Americans a Slav was a Slav, and how could they know the age-old enmity between Poles and Russians? Suslovich, though rough-cut, doubtless of peasant origins, was a decent enough fellow in his boorish way, but the Count, an admirer of Santayana and Henry Adams, a reader of Schopenhauer and the Duc de Saint-Simon, could not hope to find any common ground with him. To himself he laughed to think of this Suslovich teaching young students to speak Russian with a

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heavy Ukrainian accent, which was tantamount to teaching English with a heavy Yiddish accent. But no one else at the college could know this, of course, and he was not about to remark upon it.

In his way Count Kinski loved America. He would always be grateful to the country for providing him a safe port after the storms of his last years in Europe. But grateful though he was to this country, there were things about it, small things, to which he could never reconcile himself. Above all the familiarity of Americans he could not, after all these years, quite manage. The waitresses, for example, who would set a cup of tea before him, then ask, "Anything else, honey?" Or the occasional Negro student who would address him as Man, as in "You gonna want that term paper typed, Man?" The man with whom he shared his office at the college seemed to specialize in such familiarities. Six years ago, when he moved into the Count's office, upon introduction he said, "Nice to know you, Pete." The Count continued to address him as Professor Ginsberg, and only after three years of sharing an office could he bring himself, after insistent pleas, to call him by his first name, Barney. Meanwhile, Barney Ginsberg had advanced to calling him, the Count, "Babes." "How're you making it, babes," he would say when Count Kinski arrived at the office in the morning.

Ginsberg was a puzzle to the Count. He was a man of the Count's own age; in fact, he was fifty-three, a year older. Yet he seemed to dress like a boy. He taught in blue jeans; he wore a variety of caps, sometimes a baseball cap, sometimes a Greek fisherman's cap, sometimes a tennis visor. He had long grey sideburns and a drooping mustache in the style of the cossacks. He seemed not so much to wear clothes as to sport a number of costumes, disguises. He was a sociologist by training, with a Ph.D. from New York University, but he taught courses with titles that sounded like magazine articles: Blacks and Jews, The Holocaust and the Suburbs, Sex and the Changing Middle Class. His students called him by his first name. Once, when the Count was in the office, a young girl came to see Ginsberg with tears in her eyes; as the Count was leaving the room, to give his office-mate privacy, he heard the girl mention that she was pregnant and ask what he intended to do about it.

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Barney Ginsberg was a popular teacher; Count Kinski, as he himself knew, was not. If many of the courses he taught had not been required for a degree in political science, the numbers of students who enrolled for his courses would have been even smaller than they were. And there were sometimes as few as seven or nine students in his courses. He taught the only way he knew how—from on high. He lectured for the full fifty minutes: on Locke, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Marx, his beloved Tocqueville. Sometimes he would close his eyes and imagine himself delivering these lectures at Oxford or the Sorbonne. Then he would open them to note that a few of his students had closed theirs, to dream surely of places far distant from these citadels of learning. He had a reputation as a hard grader. He filled the margins of his students' papers, questioning their inchoate ideas, correcting their English. They must have thought him a little mad.

They, his students, were themselves a strange lot. Most of them worked, and were not students full-time. They wanted, for their various reasons, a degree, perhaps to get a better job. Many were Negroes; a few were Mexican. A number of them were housewives whose children were grown, or at least old enough for them to return to school. Count Kinski of course encouraged no intimacy between them and himself. When they came in to his office, as one or another occasionally did, to question him about a term paper, he always addressed them as Miss or Mr.; they called him Professor. Over the years he had had a few bright students: a Japanese boy named Bob Anoba, who went on to law school; a Swedish girl named Karen Lingren, who went on to graduate studies at the University of Chicago. But he, the Count, had lost touch with them.

Was Mrs. Sheila Skolnik to be another of his memorable students? It was difficult to say, though it seemed unlikely. This was the second of his courses she had taken; autumn term she had written a quite respectable paper for his course in Political Theory. No power of thought, you understand, but well organized, neatly typed, largely grammatical. Under the current dispensation, such small blessings loomed large. She had made an appointment to discuss her paper for the current semester's course in Continental Political Thinkers. She had told him she wished to write on the subject of

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Tocqueville and the Ancien Régime. It was late afternoon. She was due for her appointment twenty minutes ago. The Count had given up on her, and had begun to pack his briefcase. Across the room, Barney Ginsberg, feet on his desk, was reading a paperback, a detective story with rather a lurid cover.

A knock on the door. "Enter," said the Count.

"Excuse my being so late," said Mrs. Skolnik. A Jewess, in her early thirties, she was tall, had thick dark hair but blue eyes, was slender but of ample bosom. Ginsberg dropped his feet from the top of his desk at her entrance, set down his detective story, and stared.

"I am very sorry, Professor Kinski," she said. "Is there still time for our meeting?"

"I fear not," said the Count. "My bus leaves in ten minutes. Perhaps on Friday we can meet."

"Can I drive you home, Professor? Maybe we could talk about my paper on the way."

"Very well, Mrs. Skolnik," said the Count, feeling there was perhaps something slightly irregular about this. "My apartment is on Pratt Avenue, near the lake. Are you certain I shall not be taking you out of your regular way?"

She said not at all. The Count put on his overcoat. As he held the door open for his student, he bade Professor Ginsberg good evening.

"Right on, Pete," said Ginsberg, and, though he could not be certain, the Count thought he saw him wink.

Mrs. Skolnik had a red sports car, a Japanese model, and getting into it, his legs stretched straight out, his briefcase on his lap, the Count felt as if he were sitting on the ground. They talked about Mrs. Skolnik's paper. The Count suggested books she might consult; she asked questions about the paper's length, its deadline, what he expected it to accomplish. The subject was quickly exhausted, and a long ride still lay ahead. The Count would have been perfectly happy to remain silent the remainder of the way, but felt that it would not perhaps be courteous to do so.

"What does your husband do, Mrs. Skolnik, if I may ask?"

"Oh," she said, "Larry was a dentist."

"I am sorry," said the Count, "I did not know you were a widow."

"I'm not," she said.

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"But you spoke of your husband in the past tense?"

"I guess I did. I didn't notice. No, Larry and I were divorced four years ago."

"Have you children?" the Count asked.

"Yes, two. A boy and a girl, Ronnie and Melissa. They're both in school now, which makes it possible for me to go back to school. I'd like eventually to go to law school. That's why I'm majoring in political science."

"I see," said the Count.

"I live with my parents now. My mother's being able to watch the kids is a great help. Larry still sees them every Sunday. But it was tough on them for a while, not having their father with them."

"I see," said the Count, who felt the conversation getting rather more intimate than he liked. He asked her where her parents lived, and they fell into a general discussion of neighborhoods in Chicago and its suburbs. Her parents lived in the suburb called Northbrook, a relatively new and rather wealthy one. When she pulled up in front of his apartment building, she remarked on how nice it must be to live so close to the lake. The Count agreed that it was, especially in summer, then crept out of the sports car, thanked her, and waved good-by from a crouching position as she drove off.

The day's mail brought a copy of the Zurich monthly *Schweizer Monatshefte,* which he read with his evening meal: herring in aspic, a Hungarian sausage and green beans, with a torte and tea for dessert. After clearing and washing his evening's dishes, he poured himself a digestif, put some Mozart quartets on his phonograph, and read in Santayana's *Dominations and Powers.* Towards eleven o'clock, as was his custom, he retired to bed, there, as was distinctly not his custom, to dream of making unspeakably passionate love to Sheila Skolnik.

When he arrived at his office on Friday morning, Barney Ginsberg was already there. He seemed to be dressed in the outfit of a stevedore. He wore blue jeans, a thick sweater with a high neck, the sleeves pushed up on his hairy forearms, and a blue wool cap which he had on indoors.

"So?" Ginsberg said.

"Pardon?" said the Count.

"So—did you boff her?"

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"Sir?" asked the Count.

"Forget it, babes. I already know the answer. No chance. I already know the type, all too well. She's a princess, if ever there was one."

"A princess?" The Count's interest was piqued.

"A Jewish Princess, babes, for Christ's sake."

"I see," said the Count, not really seeing at all, but not wishing to carry on the conversation any further.

Sheila Skolnik was not in class that day; nor was she in class again on Monday. Wednesday, when the papers were due, she called the Count on his office phone.

"I'm sorry to have missed class," she said. "I've had the flu. But I've finished my paper. Can I deliver it to you tonight at your apartment?"

"That is not truly necessary, Mrs. Skolnik. If you have it to me in class on Friday, that will be sufficient."

"But I don't really want to be late. Will you be at home tonight?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Good. I'll be there around eight."

"Yes, but . . . " She had already hung up.

"Most irregular," Count Kinski muttered, "most irregular." He cleared his dishes, poured the remains of the consommé from the small pot into a jar, wrapped the remaining slice of Westphalian ham for the refrigerator, returned the heavy textured Lithuanian bread to his bread box. "Most irregular."

The Count decided to take his tea this evening in his wing chair, the chair in which he sat most evenings to do his reading. It was 7:40; Mrs. Skolnik was to arrive at 8:00. A heavy rain pattered against the metal portion of the air-conditioner that rested on the sill outside his living room window. He thought, as he perhaps did too often, of his boyhood at his family's estate. Of his life there among the servants. Of Herr Kügler's accounts of Yasnaya Polyana. Of his mother, a fragile woman of artistic temperament, playing Chopin on the grand piano in the drawing room. Of a trip his father took him on to Warsaw, and of their going together, just he and his father, to a puppet opera with a full puppet orchestra. He must have been eight years old at the time.

The Count no longer asked why history had done to him what it had—why it had allowed him to glimpse the old life,

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to live it long enough to develop a taste for it, and then, like a rug from under a clown, had pulled it roughly away. Still, he often thought, had history not intervened, first in the form of the Nazis and then in that of the Communists, one barbarian horde replacing another, what might his own life have been like? Much, he supposed, like his father's: seeing after the family business, sitting in the Provincial Assembly, organizing the rounds of hunts, buying horses, travelling to European capitals for business and pleasure. (His father was an ardent Anglophile, and loved London above all other world cities.) Although his own habits were more bookish than his father's, his responsibilities, and hence his life, would not have been much different. Where his father had improved the family stables, he perhaps, given the chance, would have enriched the family library. Doubtless by now he would have long been married, have had children, a son of his own to take to the famous puppet opera in Warsaw.

Twenty minutes after eight and still Mrs. Skolnik had not arrived. Outside the rain continued, undiminished in force. It was a grave mistake allowing her to deliver her paper to him at home. Most irregular, and now to irregularity was added tardiness. By this hour the Count had generally settled into his work—grading student papers, going over lecture notes—or his reading for the book on America he hoped to write one day. He did not appreciate his customary schedule being interrupted in this way. He would not permit it to happen again.

At 8:45 the doorbell rang. Having rung the bell to let his visitor in, the Count walked to his front door. He lived on the third floor of a walk-up building. Coming out to the hallway he watched Mrs. Skolnik climb the last half flight of steps. She was utterly drenched by the rain.

"Sorry to be so late," she said. "I coudn't find a parking space." She brought a large manila envelope out of an ample leather shoulder bag. "Here is my paper. At least it's dry, even if its author isn't." She stood out in the hall, water dripping off her. Her hair was a great dishevelment. She sneezed, said good night, turned to depart, when the Count heard himself say:

"See here, you are very wet. Please come in to dry off for a bit. Perhaps you will have a cup of tea."

"Thanks. I'd like that." She removed her boots in the hall;

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also her raincoat, which was soaked through. Underneath the coat her skirt and blouse were greatly blotched with rain.

"Allow me to get you a towel," said the Count, leading the way toward his bathroom. "Will Earl Grey be acceptable? Or is there another sort of tea you prefer?"

"Whatever you have will be fine," she said, the towel under her arm, slowly closing the bathroom door.

The Count put on the water, got out a fresh set of tea things, set out some biscuits and chocolates on a small teak platter. He had inserted two linen tea napkins in small pewter rings, when he heard his bathrom door open. Setting down the tea things in the living room, he turned to see Mrs. Skolnik, barefoot, drying her hair roughly with the towel, and wearing, so far as he could make out, nothing but his yellow terry-cloth robe, which she must have discovered hanging on its place on the back of the bathroom door.

"I hope you don't mind my borrowing this for a while, Professor," she said. "My clothes are soaked through, and I put them on the bathroom radiator to dry."

"I see," said the Count. "I see."

He bent over to pour the tea, but his hands shook. The tea pot made a great clatter against the thin China cup and saucer. Mrs. Skolnik put her hand over his to steady it. He turned and her eyes were only inches from his. He stood, and so did she; her robe had come slightly open. He was about to speak, when she gently covered his mouth with her hand. They embraced and she took him by the hand into the bedroom, where they did things together that the Count hadn't even dared to dream of.

When he woke in the morning the Count found a note on the kitchen counter next to her Tocqueville essay, still in its manila envelope.

Dear Professor,

Excuse my calling you professor but it occurs to me I don't know your first name. For complicated reasons, mostly having to do with my kids, I had to return home late last night. If I had any choice in the matter, I would have liked to stay, so that I could be with you now instead of this note. I hope you do not mind if I call you sometime later this afternoon at your office.

Truly,
Sheila S.

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The Count felt himself greatly confused. What would he say when next he spoke to her? Before last night life had seemed so orderly, so simple. No longer. What was the American idiom? In the soup. Yes, he was definitely in the soup now.

In the office Barney Ginsberg was dressed in what the Count considered his mufti. Which for Barney Ginsburg meant jeans, a shirt of flowery pattern, the top three buttons undone, and three neck chains, one with a Star of David, another with an astrological sign, the third with an animal's tooth.

"You've come to the right man, Pete," said Ginsberg, when the Count had most tentatively broached the subject pressing on his mind. He, the Count, had not mentioned Mrs. Skolnik's name.

"Yep, you've come to the right doctor, kiddo," Ginsberg said. "Since my divorce nine years ago the subject of women is my great subject. If I was twenty years younger, I'd write my dissertation on it. 'Unattached and Attached Women in the Last Quarter of the Twentieth Century: A Field Study' by B. L. Ginsberg. Dissertation hell, we're talking about a god damn best-seller."

"It is not disconcerting to you, Barney, seeing many different women?"

"Not in the least, babes. I ask only two prerequisites: women I go out with must have a job and they must have no sex hang-ups. With my alimony and support payments I'm too broke to help support anyone, and I'm too old to teach the basic course in human sexuality."

"But do you not find yourself in—how to put it?—emotional entanglements?"

"What kind of entanglements? Look, Pete, these ladies know what they're getting into with me up-front. We provide each other a little service. When this loses its interest, we split. No hard, no complicated, feelings. You only go around once."

"But you feel no misgivings?"

"Only when some chick I'm still interested in splits before I do."

"No responsibility accompanies these intimacies?" asked the Count.

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"What am I supposed to do, babes, propose marriage because some bimbo agrees to sleep with me? Come off it. The way I look at it I'm grateful but so should she be. There's no longer any such thing as an innocent woman, if ever there was, which I frankly doubt." Ginsberg brought his feet up on his desk. He was wearing red shoes with blue stripes across them.

"I see," said the Count, who was not certain he did.

The Count was gratified that Barney Ginsberg was out of the office when Mrs. Skolnik called. He asked if she had arrived home without any difficulties. He asked after her illness. Was she feeling any better? She said she was but thought it would be better to remain home for a few days.

"Won't you call me Sheila?" she asked.

"Yes," said the Count, failing to do so.

"And what can I call you?"

"My *prenom*," said the Count, noting a slight quaver in his voice, "is Peter."

"Are you free on Sunday, Peter?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I suppose I am."

"That's the day Larry spends with the children. It's sometimes a lonely day for me. Can we spend it together?"

"I think that will be very nice."

"Please call me Sheila."

"Yes," said the Count, "I should like to be with you on Sunday, Sheila. I should like it very much."

"I would too, Peter."

Sunday was a bright day, and a warm one for late March in Chicago. Because the Count did not drive a car—yet another American thing he had failed to learn—she was to come to him. The day before he had bought a pheasant from a Czech butcher on the Near North Side. He planned dinner, and perhaps a walk along the lakefront into Evanston. He was tidying his apartment, putting away books and his pipes, a Bach cantata was playing over the radio, when, a little past noon, the doorbell rang.

She wore grey trousers—did Americans still call them "slacks"?—a white blouse with a small soft collar under a yellow sweater. The yellow of the sweater made her dark hair seem even lusher than he had remembered it; the color also

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did fine things for her eyes. As he took her coat, she leaned in, touching her cheek to his. His heart jumped.

"Well, Peter," she said. "Here we are."

"Exactly. Just so," he said.

"It's a beautiful day."

"It is indeed. Can I get you a cup of tea," the Count gulped slightly, "Sheila?"

"None for me. I had late breakfast with the children before their father came for them. A shame to waste a day like this. Maybe we ought to be outdoors?"

Not until they reached Evanston, nearly two miles from his apartment, did the Count note that he had forgot his walking stick. They spoke easily together—more easily than he would have thought. She told him of her girlhood in the Chicago suburbs; spoke of her marriage, which had ended after her father had revealed to her that her husband had been cheating on her with other women, many of them his patients. She told him of the effects of the divorce on the children, her love for whom, so evident, touched the Count in its simplicity and strength of feeling. He spoke of his own childhood, so different from hers, of his schooling, of his dead parents. When he talked of his life since arriving in America, he realized, hearing himself describe the routine of his days, that he hadn't much of a life, at least in any sense that she was likely to understand: he taught, he read, he shopped, he fixed his meals, one day led into another and thirty years had gone by.

Dinner was a great success. She had never eaten pheasant before, and this pheasant, although she could not have known it, was a particularly delicious one. They drank two bottles of wine. She asked him if he had read all the books in his apartment. He said not nearly but was afraid buying books was his great vice. She said her son looked as if he might be a serious reader one day; at any rate, she hoped so. When she asked him, he told her that he spoke four languages and read six. She said she took Spanish in high school but was not very good at it. The Count bought Napoleon for dessert, but when she looked at her wristwatch she said she was afraid she hadn't time, because she liked to be home when their father brought her children back. He walked her to her car, where before getting in she kissed him lightly, telling him she had had a marvelous day.

The Count felt exhilarated. Back in his apartment, he

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made himself a cup of tea, lit a pipe, and sat down to read dear Sheila's paper on Tocqueville. It began:

> Alexis de Tocqueville was born in 1805 and died in 1859. He was a nobleman by birth, his title being that of a Count. His ancestors were also noblemen. The Tocquevilles, like so many other families of aristocrats, did not fare well during the French Revolution of 1789.

He could bring himself to read no further. The paper, in its rudimentariness, its utter lack of intellectual sophistication, depressed him. How could he care so for a woman who wrote such sentences! Yet he did, did he not? He put the paper back in its envelope. He couldn't bear to read it, no, not this evening.

Sundays became their regular day together. They went for walks. Occasionally they would go downtown. She liked movies. Once he took her to the Art Institute, showing her the five or six paintings there that he loved. Less successful was an outing to a concert of Baroque music, during which he noticed her nodding off. She had no interest in serious music. Politics, too, were of no interest to her; not even the woman's liberation, which seemed to put so many other women into a state of agitation. She had never been to Europe, and showed little curiosity about it. The farthest she had been from Chicago was on a trip to Hawaii, where she had gone to a dental convention with her husband. Once, as a special treat, the Count bought caviar for their hors d'oeuvres; she complained about its saltiness. Most Sundays he prepared their dinner; when she did so the fare was usually plain, steak and fried potatoes, roast chicken and rice. When they went out the Count noted that other men stared at her, which made him proud but uneasy. Some Sundays they made love, but not every Sunday. In class they pretended scarcely to know each other, though the Count sometimes found himself lecturing to her alone, like a Spanish gentleman serenading his lady on her balcony.

The Count was made nervous by her invitation to meet her parents and children. She arrived to pick him up at 4:00 on the Sunday afternoon of their meeting. He wore an English suit with a waistcoat; something told him not to bring along his walking stick. It was possible, he considered, that Sheila's father and mother were only a few years older than he; they

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could indeed be his contemporaries. This was one among several things the Count hesitated then chose not to ask her about as they drove along the freeway out to her parents' home in Northbrook.

"Peter Kinski," said Sheila, once they were in the house, "I would like you to meet my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Feinberg."

"It's very nice to make your acquaintance," said Mrs. Feinberg. She struck the Count as being perhaps four or five years older than himself, slightly heavyset with a reddish tint to her hair. She wore an inordinately large diamond ring on her left hand. In the face of the mother, an old Polish proverb held, is written the future of the daughter. The prospect was not at all displeasing to the Count.

"Professor," said Mr. Feinberg, vigorously shaking the Count's hand, "my pleasure, I'm sure." He, too, could not have been more than four or five years older than the Count. He appeared to have lost none of his hair, which was thick and still quite black. He had on plaid trousers and a golf shirt with an alligator over the left breast; his upper arm muscles bulged. He wore one of the new digital watches, very large with a black face and a heavy silver band. The Count himself carried a thin pocket watch of French make.

"Sheila, dear," said Mrs. Feinberg, "maybe the Professor would like to go into the family room with Daddy, while we put the finishing touches on dinner."

"You care at all about baseball, Professor?" asked Mr. Feinberg. They were in a room whose walls were covered with knotty pine. At one end was a bar. At the other a television screen that looked to be five feet wide and four feet high, beneath which was some very complicated-looking equipment. Chairs and couches were placed about the room. A bookcase along one wall had a set of *World Book* encyclopaedias, *A History of the Jews* by Abraham Sachar, and a number of trophies with figures swinging golf clubs atop them.

"No," said the Count, "I fear athletics marks yet another gap in my knowledge of America."

"Sure," said Feinberg, "I can understand that." He picked up a small box on a lamp table, which turned on the television set, on which appeared men in pyjama-like outfits, going through movements and motions altogether mysterious to the Count. "I grew up playing the game, and I still love to watch it. Sheila tells me you teach politics."

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"Yes," said the Count, vaguely distracted by the darkness of the room and the colors floating about on the large screen.

"I have to tell you that this year was the first time I voted for a Republican for President. That's something I thought I'd never live long enough to see."

"The United States has gone through great turmoil. Perhaps it is not so surprising that your own politics would change."

"Still, in the house I grew up in FDR was like a god. He could do no wrong. Sheila tells me you were born in Poland."

"This is true."

"Our family, as far as we trace it, was from Poland, too. From Galicia. Life was never very good for the Jews in Poland. There are even people who say that under Hitler the Poles were worse even than the Nazis."

"It was less than good," said the Count. "Sometimes, when I brood upon the tortured history of my country, I think it has been so tortured—so deserving of its torturers—because of its treatment of the Jews. It makes a shameful chapter in our history, Mr. Feinberg."

"Let me turn this goddamn thing off." Feinberg picked up the gadget, pressed the button, and the colors on the screen faded softly away. "I'd like it if you'd call me Sid. My guess is we're not that far apart in age."

"I should like to, but only if you will agree to call me Peter."

"So tell me, Pete, what's the story with you and my daughter?"

"The story?" asked the Count.

"You know, where's it headed?"

"Headed?" asked the Count. "I do not know. I do know that I am greatly fond of your daughter."

"Excuse my giving you the third degree. I've no real right. But I hate to see her hurt again. Did she tell you it was me who found her husband cheating on her? I'll spare you the details. But I could've killed him at the time. He made too much money too fast. Couldn't handle it. But it broke my kid's heart. Have you been married before?"

"No," said the Count, "I have not."

A door opened. "Soup's on," said Mrs. Feinberg.

The dinner was chopped liver, a chicken soup with dumplings, a beef tenderloin, broccoli, salad, coffee and ice cream.

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Much of the conversation was about the Feinberg's grandchildren. The boy, Ronnie, played hockey, which pleased Sidney Feinberg. The girl, Melissa, was said to be very shy, and soon, according to her father, she was going to need braces on her teeth, which wasn't going to help her shyness any. Mrs. Feinberg asked the Count to call her Sylvia.

"You know, Peter," she said, "we really are very fortunate to have the children with us. We have friends whose kids have moved to California, or who themselves have moved to Florida, who get to see their grandchildren once, maybe twice a year."

At eight o'clock their father brought the children home. Sheila met them at the door. The Count saw him standing in the foyer; she did not invite him in. He was tall, sun-tanned, expensively dressed, his hair, blondish, combed over his ears. The Count felt awkward looking out at him from his chair in the living room. No, he decided, it was not awkwardness, it was jealousy he felt. He wished this man had never existed.

"Ronnie, Melissa," said Sheila, a hand on each child's shoulder. "I want you to meet a very good friend of your Mommy's. This is Professor Kinski."

The boy shook hands manfully; the little girl looked away bashfully. The Count was pleased to see that both children resembled their mother. He thought the girl dear; he preferred children shy, as he had been when a child. Their grandparents asked them what they had done on their day with their father, and Sheila rose to say that she probably ought to take Professor Kinski home.

On the drive back the Count told Sheila about his conversation with her father. "He wanted to know what was the story between us. What, my dear girl, do you suppose the story is?"

"I don't know, Peter," she said. "What do you want it to be?"

"I shall require some time to think about it," the Count said.

"There is no one hurrying you," she said.

"Let me get this straight," said Barney Ginsberg. He was dressed today as what the Count assumed was a cowboy: boots, jeans, a leather shirt, a red bandana round his neck. "Now let me get this straight. You've dipped your wick a few times and now you're thinking of getting married?"

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"Dipped my wick?" asked the Count.

"You know, slept with this chick. Let's get serious, Pete. You're in your fifties, babes, and you don't exactly have a lot of turn-around time. One big mistake now and it's ballgame for you."

"I don't think you quite understand, Barney. I am happy when I am with this woman. My life seems better with her near."

"I see, pal, I see. But tell me, what will you live on? Her annual wardrobe probably equals your salary. I know these kind of Jews. Country club *yidlach*. You're a highly educated man, Pete. Let's face it, what'll you talk to her about—designer jeans? Get serious, friend, get serious."

"But serious is precisely what I am."

"And you say there's two kids thrown into this fine bargain?"

"Yes. Two children. That is correct."

"Get serious, man, I mean, get serious."

Of his own seriousness the Count had no doubt. He had never, he thought, been more serious in his life. Marrying this woman could not but change his life, and in the most radical ways. He may not have known much happiness since arriving in America but he had succeeded in establishing order in his life, and there was a measure of happiness in that. Until Sheila, he had assumed he would end his days a bachelor, among his books, his music, his pipes, his plan for writing his great book on America in her decline. Perhaps it was time to admit that he would never write such a book—that the book, or at any rate the idea of the book, was important to him only so long as there was nothing else in his life. He was, he could tell himself, a man who was planning an important book. But if it was so important why hadn't he by now sat down to the writing of it? It was perhaps time to ask such questions.

Between this book, which was his future, and his early years in Poland, which was his past, the Count realized that until now he had spent almost no time in the present. Sheila Skolnik was the present. She represented life at the quotidian: living, breathing life in its daily aspect. The past, while he could not help but dwell on it, was never to be returned; the future, this book written for the ages, was never to be. Was his life, then, no more than two fantasies, one of the past

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and one of the future, while the present, life itself, was escaping him?

But did he really want to face the present? He tried to imagine his and Sheila's life together once they were married. An immensity of detail flooded him. Where would they live? Would he have to buy a car, to learn to drive it? What would Sheila's very American children make of his very un-American ways? Would the next Count Kinski, albeit by adoption, turn out to be a hockey player? Would Sheila, who was still young, want more children—his children? Where would the money come from to run this complicated ménage?

No less difficult was it for him to imagine their evenings together. Their Sundays were leisurely and lovely, true enough, but what about, once married, Wednesday nights? He would doubtless not be able to eat the same foods he now ate, but would have to change his diet to accommodate the children. After dinner, which would have to be eaten earlier than he now ate—again as a concession to the children—what would they all do? Would he have to buy a television set, round which they would all sit, *en famille*, jaws agape, watching God knows what inanities? Would he, as now, have his evenings free to read? Doubtless not. And Sheila? What did she do with her evenings now? He didn't know; he couldn't imagine. What, really, did he know about her?

No, it was quite impossible. The risks were simply too great. Barney Ginsberg was correct; it was too late to change his life. He had gained order. Why trade it for chaos, on the slim thread of a hope of happiness. Happiness, that essentially American ideal, what had it to do with him? History had already decreed that happiness was not to be his lot. So be it—it was time, finally, to accept the decree. He would one day die alone but at least he would live in peace. Better to allow his life to continue as it had been before. He would break with Sheila Skolnik, this woman who threatened his order, this—what had Barney Ginsberg called her?—Jewish Princess. It was all quite impossible.

The Sunday on which the Count intended to inform Sheila that things must end between them she arrived at his apartment around one o'clock with Melissa in hand. The little girl was getting over a cold, and was not feeling well enough to go off for the day with her father. The Feinbergs had made plans for the day, so Sheila brought her along to spend the

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day with them. She had brought crayons and a coloring book from home. The Count set out a glass of milk and a plate of Swedish cookies for her; she worked at her coloring book at his small dining room table. Sheila suggested that they take her to a movie; a nearby theatre, The 400, was showing a re-run of Walt Disney's *Bambi*. The Count had purchased two sea bass for his and Sheila's dinner, but this, as even he recognized, was not child's food, so they decided to go out for dinner after the movie.

The Count took his walking stick, which was a damnable nuisance getting into Sheila's sports car. Melissa sat on his lap. At the movie theatre she sat between him and her mother. Sheila bought her a large plastic cup of Coca-Cola and a box of popcorn; also a box of something called Black Crows. What extraordinary things American children insert into their mouths, thought the Count. The seven-year old child snuffled at his side. The movie turned out to be quite terrifying, even though done in animation. A forest fire scene in which the little deer loses its mother brought Melissa to tears; as the scene unrolled, she, who had until now scarcely spoken a word to him, clutched at the Count's arm. Later she slipped her hand into his. He was touched by this.

After the movie they drove to a place called McDonald's for dinner, a restaurant, Sheila told him, that Melissa adored. The Count had seen these McDonald's dotting—scarring?—the cityscape, but of course had never been in one. The one they were in, on Clark Street in a working-class neighborhood, seemed to be run by children, for of the ten or twelve uniformed workers behind the long counter none seemed older than sixteen. Sheila and Melissa ordered easily enough. But the Count found himself befuddled. He was unable to decipher the menu on the wall behind the counter; the light and din in the place further disoriented him.

"A hamburger, please," he finally said, "and a cup of coffee."

"What kind of hamburger, sir?" the girl taking his order asked.

"What kind?" asked the Count.

"Have a Big Mac, Mr. Kinki," said Melissa.

"Kinski, dear," Sheila corrected her. "Kinski, not Kinki."

"Very well. A Big Mac, then," said the Count.

They found a table, and the three of them began unpack-

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ing what seemed to the Count innumerable little plastic and paper packages. Melissa seemed in a state of high delight. The Count removed his sandwich from its plastic crate, and examined it. He had been brought up on European gastronomy, and, insofar as he was able in America, kept to this diet. This was a sandwich, he concluded, that required two hands to manipulate. Thus he lifted it to his mouth, and bit into a melange of condiments and what the Russians call grasses and a simulacrum of bread and meat. *Echt*-ersatz, he thought. As he chewed he felt a sensation akin to listening to Mozart's *Twentieth Piano Concerto* played on a wet tuba.

"How d'ya like the Big Mac, Mr. Kinki?"

"Kinski, darling, Kinski."

"I find it," said the Count, "very splendid. Most delicious." He wondered how he could dispose of the remainder, but, seeing no way to do so without hurting the child's feelings, he managed, with the aid of large draughts of tasteless coffee, to swallow down nearly half the sandwich.

Back at the Count's apartment, Melissa returned to her coloring book in the dining room, while Sheila and the Count settled in the living room.

"Thank you," Sheila said, "for putting up with that restaurant. I saw it wasn't easy for you."

"No, no," said the Count. "Not at all. I found it—how shall I say?—edifying."

"Well, you're nice to have done it."

"Sheila," said the Count, hearing a tremor in his voice, "I have some sad things I must say."

"Sad things?"

"Yes. I fear, though this is not easy for me to say, that there is little point in our continuing to see each other in this way."

"Why do you say this?" She seemed shocked; she hadn't been expecting this.

"Because I have been alone too long. I cannot change my ways. No. Perhaps it is more honest to say that I do not want to change my ways. Not now that I am more than fifty years old."

"Are you sure about this, Peter?"

"I have thought much about it."

"I see."

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"I shall always be grateful to you for your friendship."

"I see."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, "I do." And then she called: "Melissa, it's time for us to go home."

The child had put her coat on. "Thank you for a very nice day, Mr. Kinski," she said, holding her mother's hand at the door. The Count touched the girl's cheek. He would never see her again.

"May I see you down to the car?" he asked.

"I don't think so, Peter. Maybe it's better to say good-by here." She appeared to the Count as if she were holding back tears. She put out her hand. A century ago the Count would have bowed and kissed it. Now he held it, not truly wishing to relinquish it. And then she and the child were gone.

The Count felt relief. He poured a cognac, put Handel's *Wassermusik* on the phonograph, took down a Pléiade volume of *Les mémoires du Duc de Saint-Simon.* He could go undisturbed back to the old life now. Order and quiet. He sipped his cognac. He read about *le roi soleil.* He closed his eyes, the better to imagine King George in his barge floating down the Thames listening to Handel's lovely music. The book dropped to his lap when he put his hands to his eyes to stop the flow of tears.

He had made a hideous error. He didn't want to live, nor to die, alone. He had turned away a woman who had loved him, whom he had loved—loved still. But was it too late? Why need it be? He would call Sheila tomorrow. No. Why wait? He would go to her tonight. He would ask forgiveness, propose marriage, give up whatever was required of him to give up of the old life, take on all that was implied in the new. Time was left to him, and he would make it matter. Let chaos come. He would buy a television set for the children; dogs and cats, if need be. Hundreds of details would have to be worked out. He welcomed them. He telephoned for a cab, and, when asked where he was going, announced his destination as Northbrook. At the closet, he put on his coat. He looked at his walking stick, which he picked up, held before him in both hands, and, in a quick motion, over his raised knee broke it in two. As he ran down the stairs to meet his cab, Count Kinski's laughter rang round his empty apartment.

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WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS

# The Ohio Poem

for James Wright

*Everything we write turns into elegy*

1

It is early morning.
Trees lift from the fog the sun
is burning away.
Along the river the Iroquois called beautiful
an Indian stalks the faint imprint
of a twelve-point buck
who moves off ahead of him downwind.

2

I remember the thicket,
the hobo jungle,
where the park ended at the railroad tracks.

Once I touched an old bum
I thought was dead.
When he sat up
I ran the whole way home,
too terrified to tell
where I had been.

One spring my brother and I
met one of them
at the top of the hill.
He waved and spoke to us.

That afternoon, we saw him again.
He was leaning against a tree

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near the small stream at the bottom of the hill.
His face was clean. His head rested
lightly against the tree.

He seemed to be asleep.
Unless you looked closely,
you would never see
the bracelets of blood he wore.

Later, we tried to remember:
did we speak
or slip past silent?

3

And now your bones are turning
dark, like emeralds,
burning in the dark wind
somewhere along the dirty Ohio north of Wheeling,
where the women dry their wings.

Gentleman Jim, are you gone?

## At the Ruins

With the nonchalance of nineteen,
she stands knee-deep in the opened earth,
surveying the scene. A modern goddess,
her ripe breasts bulge the pockets
of her khaki shirt, her cut-offs ride
high along her thigh.

One hip thrown
loose, she seems thoughtless, lost
in time. Absently, she tucks one strand
of long unruly hair under her straw hat.
Then, suddenly, she bends and finds
the broken puzzle of an ancient urn.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

# Galerie Orphée

Now in Olympia wild carrot snows
the disenchanted temples.
Judas trees put on their scarlet flowers
and slowly let them go;
tourists trample the dwarf irises.

But in the little hills
where cypress are a balustrade
on stairs for no one, asphodel
display their white existence undisturbed.

My friend, returning from his winter travel,
opens his shop again for the new trade.
He carries marble children near the door
so they can see outside,
removes a bronze Medusa to her corner,
hangs the paintings in a row like windows,

slowly, with the same familiar gestures.
Through the painted windowpanes
I see him, but my voice has disappeared
into another dialect of silence.

Truly, what could I say?
The endless contemplation of the past
which travellers and lovers carry on,
though natural, is idleness.

Not all our errant ways,
the skewed inertial line of history,
can move beyond the compass of the flowers,
nor slip from the embrace
of immortality, that bitter woman.

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# In the Light of October

for V. G. M.

The long red seam across her throat
shows where her thyroid, instrument
of checks and balances within
the body's greater, delicate machine
no longer lies. This afternoon,
the sleeve of light unravelling, she drank
a glass of radioactive iodine
to melt the last small edge
of poisoned tissue down.

Now for a day she radiates
in isolation like a minor sun,
closing the bedroom door to company;
and sits beside the window, looking down
on ranks of cattails autumn
thinned and scoured, the Sound's
blue mantle gently thrown
around the shoulders of the cove.

Her husband, for so many hours
unable to disturb her solitude,
sleeps and wakes in the cold livingroom
imagining the rose
she plucked a week ago
from one late-blooming bush:
how radiant around a central gold
the shadows held like petals, luminous.

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ANDREW J. KAPPEL

# Ezra Pound in Heaven

SOMETIME DURING JULY 1919 Ezra Pound and his wife Dorothy met their friend Tom Eliot outside the medieval town of Excideuil in Provence and together the three headed south shouldering backpacks.[1] They were vacationing in the south of France, eager to enjoy a little sunshine and exercise after four years cooped up in rainy, war-worried London. Pound, who had walked along the old Provençal roads years before on an earlier visit, and had explored the ancient castles and towns that had flourished along them during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, was tour guide. After a few weeks of Ezra's tour, Tom struck off on his own to take a look at some cave-paintings, probably those at the Grotte de Niaux. Ezra and Dorothy continued some miles further on to Montségur, the mountaintop site of the remains of an old Albigensian temple and of the massacre in 1244 of a hundred Albigensian heretics by papal Crusaders. Though the two men headed off in different directions, they arrived at the same destination. What Pound encountered in the bright sunlight atop Montségur also greeted Eliot in the dark caves. The broken stones of the Albigensian temple and the faded outlines of the paintings of bison were remains that brought to mind the dead who had left them behind. Pound had walked eastward and climbed; Eliot had gone westward and descended to the same destination, a place—warmed by sunlight and the presence of a companion or chilled by solitude and dark—where the strong sense of absence compelled wonder about further, less certain destinations.

After these separate excursions the three travelers met back at Excideuil, where a curious conversation took place among them. By now it was the middle of August, the hottest month in the Midi. The three were out one day among the ruins of

[1] My retelling of the events that took place at Excideuil relies on Hugh Kenner's account in *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), to which I am greatly indebted.

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the town's old castle. They may have been stopping there for a drink from the old well in the courtyard, which had been unusable until Pound, a few days earlier, had bought a wooden beam to set across the well-curb and a long chain to hang down from it to the water. He was the model of the conscientious American tour guide, armed with good old Yankee ingenuity. Eliot probably limped as he sipped his water (if, that is, they had stopped for water) because unlike the venturesome Pound, he was not used to all this gadding about God only knows where, and was nursing seven distinct and separate blisters. It was at this point, as the three sipped, as Eliot limped and as Pound beamed with pride in his invention, that the curious conversation took place.

Thinking perhaps of the cave painters whose work had survived the centuries in which they themselves lay buried deep in anonymous oblivion, and seeing before him the ancient castle whose blue-blooded inhabitants were as dead and gone as their older primitive neighbors down the road, Eliot began the conversation. Out of the blue, with all the unnerving intensity of which he was capable but which he rarely expressed, he turned to his two friends, the proud inventor and his proud wife who were enjoying the sunshine and the cool well-water, and said, very simply and in a flat tone: "I am afraid of the life after death." The sipping, the basking and the beaming, we may imagine, stopped cold. Eliot had forced a moment to a crisis. No one spoke. The sun shone. The water in the cups warmed. The author-to-be of the longest poem ever written couldn't think of anything to say. That remark about the afterlife was not the sort of behavior one expected of the perfect London gentleman. It was, in tone and substance, pure Tiresias, as if come back from the dead to tell all. Was there the sense, as the silence continued, that someone had asked some unanswerable overwhelming question? The moment threatened to go on forever. What hope could there be, with a cup of water in hand and the sun brightly shining, of formulating a response to such a remark? Embarrassed by his inadvertent intensity, realizing that after the hiking, the basking and the sipping, the point was not worth pursuing, Eliot, like a proper gentleman, rescued his friends. He turned to Dorothy, gestured, perhaps with his cup of water, to Pound and said: "Now, at last, I have shocked him."

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Everyone there appreciated his effort to smooth the raw Tiresian cry into a joke among friends on vacation, and they returned to their cups of water, to the bright sun, and to the afternoon stroll.

But ten years later when the normally unflappable Pound recalled the incident in the course of composing his twenty-ninth canto, he remembered the rawness that had shocked him rather than the wit that had followed. In the midst of that canto about metamorphosis (among other things) he included an account of the moment in Provence in 1919 that had been provoked by his friend's fear of the changes death might bring about. That fear of Eliot's, not of some extreme experience, not of burning or of bliss, but simply, I think, of something new, of experience itself, had knocked Pound, the tireless sailor after the new, after knowledge and experience, for a loop he couldn't pull out of. The two friends could hardly have been more different. The afterlife was often on Pound's mind, too, but he never worried about it. His interest in it was a navigator's interest in the last uncharted sea, a cataloguer's interest in a new specimen. It was a warm prospect, seen from atop a mountain. Eliot, we may imagine, had rather early on in his life seen quite enough, thank you. Anything more was a dark, chilling prospect.

By the time Pound was composing the later cantos, where his concern with the afterlife is given full rein, the nature of his interest in it, however, had changed somewhat. Though he was a great hoarder of facts till the day he died, and even, I would bet, on that day, he was not in the end expecting to discover after life some ultimate fact that would order the chaos of human history and consciousness, and so bring to a successful conclusion a life-long but unended investigative struggle with those matters. Toward the end of his life his interest in knowledge about things had slackened. He began to abandon his program to understand it all. Very late in *The Cantos* he announced his belief that the universe cohered, even if, as was the case, his navigator's or cataloguer's notes about it—that is, his experience of it—did not cohere. Such a belief in the coherence of things had taken the form, in the earlier stages of his poetic quest, of an assumption to be proved. Toward the end he simply granted that assumption; it took the form of a given from which to proceed.

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And where to proceed? Not to a knowledge of order: proofs were by this time beside the point; he wanted the thing itself, he wanted to experience the order, not know about it. He wanted, that is, the experience of harmonious communion with everything else in the orderly cosmos. That participation in a community was his working definiton of heaven, the form of the afterlife he was, very naturally, interested in. That sense of communion was a foreclosed possibility in earlier stages of his poetic quest. As long as he thought of things as the objects of his knowledge and of himself as a sailor after knowledge, he was doomed to remain separate and alone, no matter how much he knew. His desire to know, that is, always entailed a certain alienation. Even when he knew all, and of course he never got that far, he would still be separated, separated by the very bulk of his knowledge, from the rest of creation that he was so eager to find out about. As long as he thought in terms of perceiver and perceived, he was stranded.

His was not, it is important to see, the isolation of the solipsist. He believed in the objectivity of things and in his ability to know them objectively. That belief had served him very well. It had inspired a lifetime of action, poetic and political. At Pisa, it had even saved his life. While imprisoned there—a condition uncannily metaphoric of his epistemological predicament—he shored his sanity on his ability to perceive the world surrounding him. One day he saw a dozen white oxen pass by outside the confines of the camp. In famous lines at the end of Canto LXXVIII, he thanked them for their solidity. They were like a fulcrum against which he could push, against which he could flex his senses, against which he could exert his knowledge-hungry self and in that act, know that he still existed. His motto at Pisa might have been "I know, therefore I am." After Pisa, knowledge was not enough. For there to be sight of the white oxen, there had to be distance from them; for there to be knowledge, there had to be separation. And in the later cantos distance was frightening. It seemed to foretell desolation. As an old man with his senses failing, he naturally began to feel as if the world that had once shored him up was in the process of deserting him. This was just the opposite of the heavenly condition of communion he hoped for.

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For at least one moment at Pisa, however, he entertained the notion that death might not be the realization of his fears of isolation, but rather, in fact, the end of those fears, not because it was THE END but because it might be the form of the communion he sought. He imagined for himself as a corpse a "connubium terrae," a marriage with the earth. "O Gea Terra," he called out to the earth as his deified mistress, "what drawest as thou drawest/ till one sink into thee by an arm's width, embracing thee." For Pound, love's embrace was the form of the deepest purchase a man could hope to have on his world. The man who did not love left no more impression, Pound wrote in Canto XLVII, than does the shadow of the martin's wing on roof tiles. When a man penetrated his world to the depth of a loving arm's embrace, though literally only so many inches, he left on it an impression that would last long after he had gone.

> Hast thou found a nest softer than cunnus
> Or hast thou found a better rest
> Hast' ou a deeper planting, doth thy death year
> Bring swifter shoot?
> Hast thou entered more deeply the mountain?

A belief in death as the ultimate form of this erotic communion is a difficult belief to sustain. Pound knew, as Keats did, for instance—who was a much more persistent suitor of erotic death—that she might be no mistress at all but rather, as Keats called her, "the great divorcer forever." The bleakest moment in the *Pisan Cantos*, and a sobering one, occurs when Pound writes: "the loneliness of death came upon me (at 3 P.M. for an instant)." But an instant was enough. Whatever else death might be, it was certainly the end of things as they had been. Pound hoped that it constituted a new, more intimate relationship with things, but he would have to wait until he was somewhat further along in his quest in order to understand what the terms of that new relationship might be.

He had decided to work toward such an understanding even before the *Pisan Cantos*. In the early forties, with the Chinese History Cantos and the John Adams, or American History, Cantos written and published, and with his economic

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work done, at least "in the main," he set out on the final leg of his ambitious literary odyssey: "From 72 on," he said, "we will enter the empyrean." But World War II broke on him and interfered with his plans before he had well begun. He had hoped before the war, while he was still in Italy, to talk with George Santayana, then living in Venice, about notions of heaven. But his effort to tackle the subject begins properly after the war, after the *Pisan Cantos*, and while he was at St. Elizabeths Hospital. He was unlikely to find anyone like Santayana there, anyone at all with whom to talk coherently about the matter, so he turned to books as his guides.

He might, of course, have turned to his friend T. S. Eliot's books, for Eliot had been conducting for some time now, most notably in the *Four Quartets*, a similar investigation. When a young friend of Pound's wrote to him in 1954 to ask if the *Four Quartets* ought to be included in the list of works necessary for a young man's education, Pound replied: "I don't know what good the 4 Quarts/ could do you. yr/ life ought to be AHEAD of you, not behind." Eliot's late poems were, Pound understood, projections made at the end of this life about the next. They were, then, just what he was looking for. But their author was also the author of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and as such naturally did not inspire confidence as a tour guide through unknown regions. A visit arranged by Prufrock, who had worried that the ladies who talked of lusty Michelangelo would notice his bald spot, who refused to eat a peach for fear its juices might smudge his modest neck-tie, who was able to feel momentous terror in the mildest of encounters, who was, as he had said himself at Excideuil, afraid of the life after death, such a visit would probably have avoided all the most interesting things. After all, Pound was interested in an unprecedentedly intimate experience of things, a communion like the communion of the sex act, and Prufrock had not, even in his love song, let himself have anything to do with the beautiful, beckoning mermaids of his imagination.

Pound eventually found many guides to his liking among the mystical philosophers whose works he read so avidly at St. Elizabeths. In reading them for information about heaven he undertook his last great reading program. Actually, he was returning with this program to an interest he had had very

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early on in his career but which he had shelved during the intervening years in order to pursue his historical studies. He read, or read again, Anselm and Allen Upward, G. R. S. Mead and St. Antoninus, John Heydon and Duns Scotus, Scotus Erigena and Apollonius of Tyana, and of course, Dante of the *Paradiso* and the *Convivio*. His vision of the afterlife owes something to each of these writers, especially to Dante, but one theologian in particular, the Scottish monk Richard of St. Victor, presented a vision of heaven that most directly answered Pound's hopes.

As Pound pointed out in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), Richard's heaven is the realm of the beautiful; his heavenly condition is the state of beholding beauty. Pound also noted in his study that according to Richard we could enjoy a faint taste of heavenly splendor "by naming over all the most beautiful things we know." The dynamics of achieving the Richardian condition of heaven, then, are simple. The presence of the beautiful (even if only in the mind) provokes the response of love from the beholder. The relationship between perceiver and perceived is no longer that of knower and known but that of lover and beloved. Inspection at arm's length is replaced by a deep embrace. Understanding is replaced by possession. Communion is experienced not postulated.

Richard's heaven, that is, is the hoped-for spiritual community where the rift between a man's intellect and the objects of its attention is unknown. There is no such rift in Richard's heaven—but not because the intellect becomes privy there to new information, to more or better knowledge. That is the case, to side-step for a moment, in Keats's heaven, which was to be, as Keats explained in one of his letters, a perfect community where each intellect had full immediate knowledge of all the others. Keats had perhaps not lived long enough—as Pound certainly had—to begin to tire of the delights of perception, and so he envisioned his heaven as a state of perfected, completed knowledge. Richard's heaven is not a community of knowers, but of former knowers who had abandoned the project of knowing in order to pursue a lover's impulse to possess.

In a formulation that Pound much admired, Richard mapped out like a tour guide the stages of thought that led to the condition of heavenly communion. Pound summarized

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these categories, which trace a progression of intellection from a knower's understanding to a lover's possession, as follows: (1) *cogitatio*, "the aimless flitting of the mind"; (2) *meditatio*, "the systematic circling of the attention around the object"; and (3) *contemplatio*, "the identification of the consciousness WITH the object." As this schema prescribes, the cost of achieving the heavenly state of communion is the loss of individual identity. As the cogitation turns into meditation and the meditation into contemplation, the perceiving consciousness comes closer and closer to the object of its attention until it is indistinguishable from it, or as Pound translates Richard, it becomes identified WITH that object. There is no longer any distance between perceiver and perceived. Pound invoked Richard's categories again and again in his writing and singled the scheme out for praise because of its practicality. It was, he said, "something a man could check up on."

Which is exactly what he did. Many of the lyrical set-pieces in the later cantos are enactments of Richard's scheme for achieving a heavenly condition. The greatest of these is Canto XC. The canto begins and ends with a quotation from Richard which emphasizes the irrelevance of selfhood in heaven, even its downright undesirability. "Animus humanus amor non est, sed ab ipso amor procedit, et ideo seipso non diligit, sed amore qui seipso procedit." The quotation asserts that the individual soul is not love but that love flows from it, and it cannot therefore (in Pound's translation) "delight in itself but only in the love flowing from it." That love is the cause for delight because it flows from loving perceiver to beloved perceived and heals the rift between them. It creates the paradisal community. It gets you into heaven. The quotation from Richard belongs at the head of Canto XC because that poem is Pound's greatest recorded effort to get to heaven by enacting Richard's three-stage model of ascent.

It begins in the mode of *cogitatio*, with the poetic consciousness flitting from one thing to another: from Richard's idea about love, to an idea of Scotus Erigena's about metaphor, to the Norse ash-tree Yggdrasil, to Ovid's old couple, Baucis and Philemon, to Castalia (the font on Parnassus dedicated to Apollo), to Amphion, to the Confucian Council known as the San Ku, to the Palais de Justice in Poitiers, France, to Jacques de Molay, the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar.

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There is a logic of sorts to all this leaping about, for each of the items mentioned is associated by Pound with the coming together of human and divine. In some instances the association is obvious. Yggdrasil, for example, is the mythological tree that joins heaven and earth. At the Castalian spring, Greek pilgrims purified themselves in preparation for their encounter with Apollo, at his Temple further up the hill. Other associations are not so obvious. The Confucian Advisory Council, the San Ku, for instance, belongs in this company because the book in which Pound read about it, Couvreur's edition of the *Chou King*, pointed out that the San Ku carried the mandates of heaven to earth. The mention of Baucis and Philemon, Ovid's old couple, is doubly justified because their story involves not only the confrontation between human and divine, but also a case of the condition of perfect union achieved after death. Baucis and Philemon were transformed at the moment of death into "two trees so close together that their branches [seemed] to grow upward from a single trunk."

The scatter-brained cogitation subsides and the second stage of the approach to heaven, the *meditatio,* begins with the mention of Aphrodite and takes the more directed form of a plea to her. The plea assumes the circular strategy of a litany—that is, of individualized entreaties and repeated refrain: "from under the rubble heap/ m'elevasti/ from the dulled edge beyond plain/ m'elevasti/ out of Erebus, the deep lying/ from the wind under the earth/ m'elevasti/ from the dulled air and the dust/ m'elevasti/ by the great flight/ m'elevasti."

The third stage begins when a blue serpent appears in the canto. The plea to Aphrodite ends, the last "m'elevasti" echoes upward, and we begin to approximate the condition of *contemplatio*, or the identification of the poetic consciousness with the object of its attention, as we enter an extended imagist poem that depicts a ritual sacrifice to the goddess. The blue serpent glides from a rock pool, and to join it come nymphs, bright fish, fauns, sirens, leopards and horsemen. Black-winged birds appear singing in the umbrella pines that surround the pool. Flutes sound. Banners wave. It is as if Pound were "naming over all the most beautiful things" he knew, filling the mind with the contents of heaven. As the sacrificial host is gathering, Pound shifts the scene momen-

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tarily so as to include in his catalogue the sight he had at least once of Ligurian fishermen setting out to sea at night with lights to celebrate the festival of the Madonna of Montallegre floating in the wakes of their boats:

> And they take lights now down to the water
> the lamps float from the rowers
> the sea's claw drawing them outward.

This lush religious scene appears elsewhere in *The Cantos*, most momentously in Canto XLVII, which anticipates much of Canto XC. In that earlier canto, Pound confers upon the scene a pagan mythological significance. The reddish lights by the boats become the anemones that Aphrodite, to assuage her grief, made spring from the blood of her dead lover Adonis (whom Pound calls by his Babylonian name, Tamuz). As Ovid tells the story, she poured nectar on his wounded loins, from which bloody rivulets ran down the sand to the sea. Anemones sprang from the fertile mixture. These flowers, according to other legends, floated out to sea on the blood of Adonis, and gave their name to the small sea animal that so resembles them in shape. For Pound, the Ligurian Christian rite re-enacts the classical drama of lament and transformation.

> Tamuz! Tamuz!!
> The red flame going seaward. . . .
> From the long boats they have set lights in the water,
> The sea's claw gathers them outward. . . .
> *Kai* MOIRAI' ADONIN
> The sea is streaked red with Adonis,
> The lights flicker red in small jars.

These moving lights take their place among the other participants gathering in Canto XC for the sacrifice to Aphrodite. An irresistible force has set them all in motion, a force like a tidal pull. Castalian waters, Pound suggests, exert such a pull: "Castalia like the moonlight/ and the waves rise and fall." Not only are the pilgrims who partake of those moonlight waters purified, they are also drawn irresistibly, as if on strings, to their encounter with the divinity. Even stones feel

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the pull; mysteriously, as the canto's ritual continues, they begin to assemble themselves into the shape of an altar. The force that is moving everything, of course, is love. It is the impulse that animates the anemones which still preserve the vestiges of the blood of Adonis' loins. It is, as Richard says, what flows outward to the beloved. The consciousness which by naming all these beautiful participants has filled itself with them, and with their accelerating love, hopes to move with that impulse to the condition of union with its object. At the climactic moment in this third stage of the canto, flames shoot from the now fully formed altar and smoke rises upward carrying the sacrificial host, and the consciousness that holds it, away, "free now, ascending." They ascend out of sight, out of the poem, beyond our knowing. At this point we have gotten as close as we ever get in *The Cantos* to heaven. When the next canto begins, we are back among scattered hopes and historical clutter.

The brilliance of Canto XC lies in part in Pound's realization that imagism was a poetic mode remarkably well suited to the enactment of the third stage of Richard's schema. By the last stage of the canto the struggling poetic voice, flying from one association to the next and then urgently entreating, is silenced. The poetic consciousness powering the voice disappears with it behind the paraphernalia of the imagist ritual, with which it becomes filled and identified. Any purely imagist poem embodies the condition of *contemplatio*; the poetic consciousness, whether writer's or reader's, takes the shape of the images it confronts. Such possession is perfect possession. It was one of Pound's consolations at Pisa. No matter what his circumstances, a man could always name his most beautiful things, and in naming them possess them. "How is it far," he asked again and again, "if you think of it?" (The white oxen, of course, were a contrasting consolation.)

This phenomenon—of the poetic consciousness becoming fixated on the object of its attention to the point of disappearance—occurs not only in Pound's early imagist verse but also in the paradisal moments in the *Pisan Cantos,* as when, for instance, Pound's suffering, jumpy poetic persona becomes absorbed, comforted and stilled in the smell of mint or the taste of sausage. The unification of perceiver and perceived through the vehicle of the senses occurs often in Keats's poet-

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ry, too, most momentously in the "Ode to a Nightingale," where the union is, as it always is in Pound's poetry, only temporary: the sound of the nightingale's song catches the attention of the poet, draws him closer and closer until he is for a moment united with the bird, and then grows fainter and fainter as the bird withdraws, finally out of earshot, leaving the poet stranded and forlorn.

Unlike Keats, though, Pound was not always unreservedly given to the self-destructive processes of empathy. As a man committed to writing "a poem including history," he naturally cultivated a sense of self as the recorder or transmitter of the information needed for his epic enterprise. This self was the anonymous presence, for instance, that without interference recorded in Cantos LIII–LXI the contents of a Chinese history book, that recorded *verbatim* in Cantos LXII–LXXI from the contents of the collected works of John Adams. As a craftsman, however, a man who works on his materials, Pound cultivated a self that was not anonymous but unique. He often called this unique quality of a self its *virtù*. "In each soul there is some one element which predominates which is in some way the quality or *virtù* of the individual; in no two souls is this the same." He became enamoured of the term during his exhaustive studies of Cavalcanti's poem "Donna mi prega." It was a term common in medieval psychologizing and used prominently by Cavalcanti in his poem. Taking his clue from Cavalcanti's usage, he refined his definition of the concept to "the potency, the efficient property of a substance or person." A self's uniqueness, that is, was also its motivation. Whatever it did, it did at the beck of its *virtù*; whatever it did, embodied its *virtù*; whatever was done, Pound wrote, glowed with "the light of the doer." Imagining men not as anonymous recorders but as unique craftsmen or makers, he envisioned an ideal world composed of radiant objects and gestures, which might include such things as the column that he saw one day in the church of San Zeno in Verona that was signed by the medieval craftsman who made it, or a simple item like the beautiful fishing fly composed of a starling's wing-feather, a piece of fox fur and a cock's hackle that he described at length in Canto LI, or even a device of wooden beam and iron chain for drawing up water out of a well, a device that demonstrated its maker's ingenuity.

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As Pound became increasingly interested in heaven and increasingly attached to Richard's vision of that realm as the community of those who had relinquished a sense of self, he naturally became suspicious of the rewards of selfhood, of its abilities to know and do—the two tasks to which he put it—and came closer and closer to the position of his friend Eliot on the matter of self. Eliot had early on in his career an even stronger commitment than Pound's to anonymous selfhood. He called for "a process of depersonalization" that was designed to refine the self into a "bit of finely filiated platinum," into, that is, a catalyst that caused action but did not itself act. The artist, he wrote, should be a medium. His artistic avoidance of personality, or unique selfhood, became in his later works the more profound personal denial of selfhood itself, of anonymous selfhood. Pound was always aware of his friend's preference for invisibility. During their days together in London before World War I, when they were working together to modernize the literary establishment, Pound told Eliot to let him take care of direct attacks; he would throw bricks in the front window, while Eliot ran around back and looted the place. Though it was not his way, Pound appreciated Eliot's inclination to play possum and liked to tease him about it. Sometimes though, especially in the thirties, he did not approve of it. In those years Pound wanted action and playing possum did not seem the way to get things done. When he felt that the inclination to selfless anonymity spoiled one of Eliot's works, he did not hesitate to condemn it.

In the fifties, however, when he reread some of Eliot's works that he had criticized earlier, he, at least in one important instance, recanted. In 1959 he reread Eliot's *After Strange Gods* (1934) and admitted that upon first reading it years ago he had not appreciated Eliot's "distinction between A Church, an orthodoxy, and a collection of intelligent observations by individual theologians, however brilliant." Richard's vision of heaven as the condition of communal impersonality—Pound was beginning to realize—might be found elsewhere, much closer to home. Eliot's religious orthodoxy embodied the same selflessness and communalism. What's more, Eliot is responsible for our familiarity with the grandest expression of Richard's vision of heaven—Dante's multifoliate rose. As individual souls were assumed into the heavenly communion of

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saints, their distinctive identities dissolved into the harmony of the petals of the rose, where each one took his place. Each one shone, not with the uniquely colored light of its *virtù*, but with the same bright yellow light of love. Eliot's fear of personality, the need to escape from personality of which he famously spoke, and his more profound rejection of mere selfhood account for his attachment to Dante's rose as the symbol for the condition of salvation. It appealed to Pound for the same reasons.

Though within the confines of *The Cantos* Pound never gets to heaven, we can imagine him rising out of the swampy ground of San Michele, the cemetery island in Venice where his body is buried, cogitating, meditating and contemplating his way upward toward heaven one last time. We can imagine him approaching the outlying circles of the heavenly rose, sighting a vacant petal and settling in. As he settles in, he might catch sight of a figure in a nearby row dressed impeccably and anonymously in a banker's blue suit and winking with the assurance of someone who is having the last laugh. Eliot would have had no trouble recognizing Pound as he approached, for he would probably be wearing the ill-fitting green billiard-cloth trousers that he sometimes wore on important public occasions. Eliot's desire to escape from the identifying trappings of personality, from the troubles of knowing and doing that personality entailed, had been the right way to go all along.

When Pound was writing his obituary for Eliot in 1965, he recalled their visit together to Excideuil. He wrote, "let some thesis writer have the satisfaction of 'discovering' whether it was in 1920 or '21 that I went from Excideuil to meet a rucksacked Eliot." (It was 1919.) During this second recollection of Eliot's behavior at Excideuil, thirty-five years after his first recorded recollection, he remembered his friend's wit rather than his raw Tiresian cry about his fear of the afterlife, and he asked, "Who is there now for me to share a joke with?" We can imagine the two of them in heaven on the day Pound arrived enjoying a last joke together, a joke at Pound's expense—he had been wrong about something important—but at that point, who would have cared?

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CHARLES MARTIN

# "Grace, Secrets, Mysteries . . ."

*Fatima, 1917*

Three scowling, hamfisted faces
Squint at the alien camera suspiciously:
Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco,
Monsters of piety

And self-abasement, fresh
Green shoots grafted to the ancient stem
Of penitence. They mortify their serious flesh
Until Our Lady must caution them:

*"Drink stale ditch water, share*
*Your lunches with poorer children or your sheep;*
*Enough, no more—for God is troubled that you wear*
*Thick ropes to cut you while you sleep. . . ."*

But what *is* enough, when nothing
Seems to be—when no amount of suffering suffices
To close the gates of hell?
Lucia hangs
Above the agonizing faces

Of the damned, a scum of souls
Weightlessly drifting on a sea of fire.
*What is enough?* Demons rake the coals
And waves of flame leap higher.

Who will heed the warning
Of these devout, uneducated children?
Only those who are themselves already burning
In the earth's slow cauldron,

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Gnarled as the olives and scrub oaks
That have learned to live almost without water
In the meager hills where every pile of rocks
Commemorates its virgin martyr—

Attacked, of course, by the atheist
Mayor, whose strident printing press bids faction
Unite with faction: *"REPUBLICANS! Awaken and resist*
*The seductive music of reaction!"*

The great war widens and Portugal
Begins to slide: conscripts herded first to Mass,
Then to the trenches. Lucia's twin cousins inhale
Barbed hooks of mustard gas,

Return to proclaim that the scattered
Innocents of every explosion
Limb by luckless limb will be regathered
On the Day of Resurrection;

While at Lourdes, Anatole France,
"Quaffing the cynic's cup to the last bitter dregs,"
Faced with a long wallful of jettisoned crutches and canes,
Asked, "But—are there no wooden legs?"

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MARTHA HOLLANDER

# Venetian Blinds

On my window I have the new model,
The subtle modern kind: a little twist
Of the plastic rod, stiff with crystalline
Newness, will always show day to the night.

Surprise—morning already, and all the
Heavy light sifts into my room now, breathed
By the glistening landscape of water-
Towers and roofs. Summer, city, those two
Hot conditions that work the quick changes
On each other, melt and shimmer for hours.
It isn't Venice out there at all whose
Buildings wink and crumble like old jewels,
But another rich place framed in brackish
Sick sea, when the sun, still echoing stripes
Across my late bed, glares over Manhattan.

And it isn't a blond brocaded queen
Whose white body is bisected by the
Whiter blinds—look, here is a glimpse of breast,
There, the finer curves are compelled into
Anonymous shadows. It isn't Titian
Approaching the royal nymph to paint her

But a shabby man who sketches, a friend
Who looks up now from the burning grey street
As the New York girl, Renaissance-naked,
Stands half-hidden at the window and waits.

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ROBERT LOUTHAN

# None of Us

You wish your wife weren't in love
unless with you. The night she said she'd rather
be with me, you stopped your foreplay
and began a grave in your body. How that hurt.
Well, I don't want it.
Not for me, not for her, not even for you.

She tells me all about you
and it's not enough. The way you weep
each time she's leaving, the foolishness you feel
as you kneel by the tub and wash her breasts
after she's packed. Look,
I'd thank you for that if you could take it.
For your sake, you should wash her with your tears.

She says our joy is just as intense
as your sorrow. We know we're doing wrong,
and that helps. Do you
want to know what happens here?
We make you dead for hours at a time.

I'm glad you think you come out ahead
whenever she goes home,
because she stays there longer
than with me. Forgive me for pitying you.
None of us deserves this sharing.

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# The Same

for W. E. Butts

The night your father died,
you saw the stars screwed deeper
into the sky. Weeping,
you wished cheeks weren't waterproof,
and held your head in your hands
like an offering.
You hoped he'd learn to haunt.

It was the same for me
when my father died. He collapsed
in my arms, but I couldn't
lift him to heaven.

Because people die to have the dark done
to them, and graves guarantee,
the dead can talk to each other
only through their survivors. Listen to me.

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ROBERT ASAHINA

# Theatre Chronicle: *Nicholas Nickleby*

"Was it worth $100 a seat?" That is the question I have been asked most often about *Nicholas Nickleby*. In answer, I can only say I was lucky enough to get complimentary tickets, but would gladly have paid the full price. For by any measure—length (over eight hours, plus three intermissions), scale (eighty-one scenes involving thirty-nine actors in 119 roles), and expense (more than $1.25 million in capitalization and over $200,000 a week in operating costs), not to mention critical acclaim—the Royal Shakespeare Company's adaptation of Charles Dickens' third novel was the most impressive theatrical event of the year, perhaps of the past dozen years.

But was it any good? Long after *Nicholas Nickleby* finished its fourteen-week engagement at the Plymouth Theatre, I am still wondering. I have no doubts about the sheer delight I frequently felt during the performance. But I also recall the discomfort of spending more than an entire working day cramped in an unnatural position. The only way I can begin to assess the experience is to ask myself whether it was worth not the money but the time.

Why should the play run so long? And why should anyone see it all in one sitting? (It is true that audiences could see the performance on two successive evenings, but each of the over four-hour segments would still be twice as long as a typical Broadway play.) After all, no one would read the entire 800-page novel in one stretch; indeed, *Nicholas Nickleby* first appeared in nineteen monthly installments in 1838–39.

Still, there is something undeniably grand about an artistic experience in which one can be immersed for such a lengthy period. The obvious comparison is to Wagnerian opera, but *Nicholas Nickleby* presents a more diverse spectacle. And much of its force comes from the rich variety, the dense texture, of the experiences it offers. To begin with, the simple technical demands on the actors are so great that their endurance, apart from their artistry, becomes a significant factor in the viewers' shared appreciation, which in turn becomes a rare kind of public intimacy. When was the last time you spent eight hours in the dark with anyone but a lover or a family member? That the essence of the theater is the immediacy of live performance has never so forcefully—so dramatically—been made evident to me. When Nicholas, after suffering various indignities, finally strikes Squeers, the evil schoolmaster of the corrupt Dotheboys Hall, the cheers of the spectators seem to be a genuine empathic response—based on something like the mutuality of feeling

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and interest that comes from living with someone—and not in the least the self-conscious and ironically condescending reaction of a spectator to a character in a melodrama.

The most impressive acting is by Roger Rees in the title role. It could not have been easy for him—especially since he is on stage almost continuously—to avoid falling into the veristic trap of making Nicholas appear exclusively like the insufferably earnest, self-righteous, and self-dramatizing prig that he too often is in the novel. Also noteworthy is Alun Armstrong as Squeers, cackling maniacally at his own cruelty, a bully whose violence toward the weak is matched only by his bluster toward the strong. As Ralph Nickleby, Nicholas' heartless uncle, John Woodvine exhibits a different kind of cruelty, precise and cold; as Newman Noggs, Ralph's assistant and total opposite, Edward Petherbridge is an enjoyable jumble of eccentric mannerisms and speech patterns. And as the unfortunate cripple Smike, David Threlfall is truly pathetic without being embarrassing. The female leads, unfortunately, are less satisfactory. Kate, Nicholas' sister, is played by Emily Richard as a raspy-voiced clone of Elizabeth Ashley, always on the verge of tears or hysteria. Matters are not helped by her clinging to her brother in a way that makes them resemble lovers instead of siblings. And Suzanne Bertish masters the affected speech of the hapless Fanny Squeers, the lovelorn daughter of the schoolmaster, but comes across like a cut-rate Madeline Kahn in the sarcastic and nasty Squeers family squabbles; she is simply unpleasant when she should be pitiable.

Most of the cast members play two and even three roles. This doubling and tripling up (no doubt the result of financial as well as aesthetic considerations) does contribute to the communal nature of the experience for both the members of the ensemble and the spectators. But it also engenders a certain uneasiness that could not have been intended (as it was, for example, in Caryl Churchill's recent *Cloud Nine*). How are we to react when we see the same actress (Lila Kaye) playing both the kindly Mrs. Crummles, who with her husband heads the band of traveling actors with whom Nicholas finds temporary refuge, and the nasty Mrs. Squeers, the wife of the schoolmaster? Or when we see another actress (Hilary Townley) portraying both the genuine infant Morleena Kenwigs, whom Nicholas tutors, and the counterfeit ten-year-old "Infant Phenomenon" Ninetta, the Crummleses' dancing daughter, who, Dickens wrote, "though of short stature, had a comparatively aged countenance, and had moreover been precisely the same age . . . for five good years. But she had been kept up late every night, and put upon an unlimited allowance of gin-and-water from infancy, to prevent her growing tall."

Such ironic descriptive passages are the one important element that has been sacrificed in David Edgar's 500-page script, which necessarily emphasizes dialogue—most of it quite faithful to the

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original. (At times the adaptation is so true to the written word that jokes get lost in the translation from eye to ear. When Nicholas is tutoring the Kenwigs family, Mr. Lillyvick, the children's uncle and the "collector of water rates," asks, "What is French for 'water'?" Nicholas replies, "L'Eau," and Lillyvick remarks, "Lo, eh? I thought as much." I was the only one in the theater who laughed—but I had read the book.) To be sure, throughout the play are scenes that mix conversation with narration, often in ways that are both revealing of and true to the spirit of Dickens. Nicholas' self-dramatizing tendency, for instance, is amusingly underscored when the character interrupts himself to address the audience, referring to himself in the third person. And when the cast reassembles after the first intermission (a fifty-minute dinner break following more than four hours of performance), there is a breathlessly funny ensemble recapitulation of "the story so far . . . "

Too often, unfortunately, Edgar's fidelity to his source is actually a source of problems. Why bother including so many characters when their roles have shrunk so much that they are nearly unrecognizable? The lecherous Mantalini, for example, who pursues Kate Nickleby when she comes to work for his wife, the milliner, plays such a small part in the adaptation that he could just as easily have been left out. The time gained by eliminating other such minor characters and their subplots could have been used to beef up more important parts, like that of Sir Mulberry Hawk, whose lust for Kate and whose complicated relationship with the evil Ralph Nickleby are given short shrift. And elsewhere, the adaptation is only superficially faithful. When Nicholas leaves London with his constant companion, the loyal Smike, whom he has rescued from Dotheboys Hall, we are told in a snatch of narration that the fog over the city "clothes its schemes of profit." In the novel, the passage is much richer: "A dense vapour still enveloped the city they had left as if the very breath of its busy people hung over their schemes of gain and profit and found greater attraction there than in the quiet region above." No doubt Edgar simply had to edit to save valuable time. But since he is well-known as one of the self-avowed Leftists who emerged in Britain out of The Fringe movement of the late sixties, I cannot help suspecting that part of his motivation for changing the words was political.

Of course, Dickens' novel did have an explicit political purpose—to draw attention to the abuses of the notorious Yorkshire schools (of which Dotheboys Hall was a fictional version). "No vacations and no questions asked," the schools advertised in Dickens' time, and they served as little more than involuntary confinement for the blind, crippled, disfigured, retarded and illegitimate offspring of uncaring parents, as well as the children of credulous middle-class families desperately trying to educate them but lacking the resources for proper schooling. Dickens meant his audience to be as

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outraged as Nicholas is at Squeers's cruelty, so we should not be surprised that Edgar does likewise.

But sometimes he goes too far, as in the last scene, which ends with perhaps the most striking image of the entire play. In the background is the double wedding of Nicholas to Madeline Bray (like him, one of the beneficiaries of the charitable Cheeryble brothers) and Kate to Frank Cheeryble. As the couples celebrate to the tune of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," a scrawny urchin—one of the refugees from Dotheboys Hall, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the recently deceased Smike—appears in the foreground. Nicholas alone notices him, and our hero advances forward, lifts the boy in his arms, and gazes solemnly at the audience as the lights dim for the last time. This is certainly a powerful note on which to close. But is it Dickens or Edgar? More the latter than the former, I'm afraid. Indeed, the scene, which has been favorably noted by some critics as an improvement on the author, is actually an invention of the adaptor. Although Dickens can certainly be faulted for his political sentimentality, he typically erred on the side of unbelievably happy endings, not on the side of denouements charged with reformist passion.

That example might merely be a case of Edgar's exaggerating certain implicit tendencies in Dickens' writing. Elsewhere, however, the adaptor adds material that cannot even be said to be true to the spirit of the original. Some of this is harmless—for example, remarks apparently inserted for the sole purpose of twitting American audiences, who paid many times the ticket price in London, where the production was heavily subsidized. ("The Americans are much devoted to grand gesture and the melodrama," Crummles declares before taking his players to the States. "And we have it on the best authority that they'll pay anything!") But other additions, though equally amusing, belong in another production, as when Crummles' troupe stages a hilarious play-within-the play, a version of *Romeo and Juliet* that would have done "Beyond the Fringe" proud (which is precisely the problem).

At other points, Edgar seems rather confused in his use of narration. When Nicholas and Smike arrive in London, along with their conversation we hear a description—"Wealth and poverty stood side by side"—that is straight out of the novel. All well and good, since our imagination needs some help in transforming what we see—the sole set of the production—into a teeming city. But why then does Edgar follow that line with "Streams of people apparently without end poured on and on"? After all, we can behold quite plainly the actors crowded and milling about in a pretty good imitation of a street scene.

The marriage of what we hear and what we see is both facilitated and hindered by that single set, a complicated and cluttered arrangement of ramps, stairs, platforms and beams, from which hang

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ropes, banners, and other materials. The overall impression it gives is somewhere between that of an untidy shantytown and that of the deck of a messy pirate ship. Surprisingly, this all-purpose set serves equally well as a city street and a country meadow, the interior of a Yorkshire schoolhouse and the exterior of a London townhouse. In addition, its multiple tiers allow cast members not participating in a scene to view the action from above or from the side. Sometimes their wordless presence is clearly supposed to have a dramatic impact (as when Nicholas—fondly remembering Kate, whom he has left behind in London while he travels to Dotheboys Hall—watches her in a sequence taking place back in the city), at other times not; but the cumulative effect is to emphasize the ensemble nature of the production. This is clearly a cast that virtually lives as well as works together, that wants to experience the play as both performers and spectators.

Other aspects of the set and staging, however, work against the action and meaning of the drama. For example, there is an elevated ramp that extends from the sides of the stage and circles in front of the mezzanine. At one point Nicholas makes what should be a simple crossover from stage right to stage left by climbing up a flight of steps, running toward the audience in the mezzanine and circling around in front of them on the ramp before reaching another platform on the stage and rushing down the opposite stairway. Since spectators in the orchestra either can watch his mad dash only by turning around and looking up or cannot see it at all (since they are under the balcony), the whole exercise seems pointless.

Even more troublesome is the staging of the climactic scene in which the evil Ralph Nickleby finally gets his comeuppance at the hands of the Cheerybles. Implicated in Squeers's sins, he then learns that the crippled and abused Smike (who has, by this point, died) was actually his long-lost son. Shattered, Ralph wanders the streets of London in search of refuge, but finds "the windows close shut, the dingy blinds drawn down." If anything, we should rejoice at his downfall, since Ralph has, even more than Squeers, represented pure evil throughout the story; whereas the schoolmaster's cruelty is bestial, Ralph's is calculated. (At one point, he reflects on the decision he made for business reasons to allow Sir Mulberry Hawk to hound Kate: "Selling a girl—throwing her in the way of temptation, and insult, and coarse speech. . . . Pshaw! match-making mothers do the same every day.") But Trevor Nunn and John Caird, co-directors of the RSC, do not encourage us to celebrate, for they have built the walls of those locked and shuttered houses out of the linked bodies of a couple dozen anonymous members of the cast. The effect is strikingly abstract and modernistic (and thus anachronistic), but it turns Ralph into a pitiable existential outcast, the tragic hero of a mini-drama of human rejection. Whatever this scene is, it is not Dickens.

Still, for the most part, the staging is marvelously inventive and in

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the spirit of the novel. When Nicholas first travels to Dotheboys Hall, for instance, a wagon is magically created for him out of a table and some wicker baskets that litter the set; the entire assemblage, propelled by extras, sways side to side in imitation of a moving vehicle. At another point, a cabriolet is put together out of the bodies of actors in half-shadow (here without any modernist implications). And throughout, David Hersey's lighting is exactly right for the material: shafts of light descending like sunlight in a forest when Nicholas and Kate retire to Devon; a single spot that creates a chiaroscuro effect for Smike's deathbed scene.

Such scenes, however, are too often merely tableaux vivants, no doubt intentionally reminiscent of the original illustrations by "Phiz" (Hablot K. Browne) that accompanied Dickens' text. The performers are unnaturally quick-frozen in place, and the static images of ruffled shirts, satin top hats, velvet cutaways, waistcoats and striped breeches, silk and crinoline dresses, lace collars and cuffs momentarily overpower the content of the drama. In their facile imitation of past art, these formalized arrangements remind me that *Nicholas Nickleby,* like "Masterpiece Theatre," has been filmed in England and will eventually be presented on American television—courtesy of Mobil Oil.

I thus cannot help speculating that a large part of the appeal of this production follows from its being, like the episodes of "Masterpiece Theater," an adaptation, featuring period costumes and quaint sentiments. Never mind that *Nicholas Nickleby* is very far from Dickens' best work. For American audiences who will "pay anything" for culture, a brand name like Dickens is a reassurance that the product is Art and that they thus won't have to think about it, only appreciate it.

This is not to deny that the enormous appeal of *Nicholas Nickleby* is grounded in a genuine experience of mutual appreciation—among the RSC members, to be sure, who are exemplary collaborators, but also between them and the audience, who share such a significant chunk of time together in close quarters. But I have a nagging feeling that *Nicholas Nickleby* encourages this real sentiment to degenerate into facile self-congratulation.

Part of the blame for this surely belongs to Dickens, whose lesser novels are sentimental melodramas that invite a pious and self-righteous response. The last scene of the play, though manufactured by the adaptor, is actually the purest example of this impulse toward moralistic complacency. For how is the audience to respond to Nicholas' daunting stare? Surely not by rushing out to do good deeds, or even by hoping that Nicholas himself will do any more than he already has. All's well that ends well, especially after more than eight hours; we can only assume that our hero, like ourselves, will go home to bed, all the while applauding his own lofty moral sensibility, just as we do his—and our own.

But how difficult is it to oppose child abuse, or lechery, or cruelty

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toward the hapless victims of circumstance? Not very, I fear. The (early) Dickensian world, pitting the unredeemably evil against the incorruptibly good in a series of episodes characterized by fantastic coincidence (overheard conversations, accidental meetings) and incredible pathos and posturing, is not one that challenges its viewers, but merely reassures them: Good will triumph over Evil, and God is in His heaven.

The problem is not just that the real world does not work like this; it is that real art does not either. In its unabashed melodrama and its undisguised invitation to participate in a comfortable, all-encompassing world of reassuring feelings, *Nicholas Nickleby* does everything that Brecht claimed a play should not do: involve the audience rather than confront it, provide it with sensations rather than force it to make judgments and decisions, and—this is the most telling criticism—wear it down rather than arouse its capacity for action. Of course a drama need not be Brechtian to be art; indeed many of Brecht's own works fail on his own criteria. But the experience of *Nicholas Nickleby* is too cozy for comfort. Its delights, though genuine, are the simple joys of superb entertainment, not the complex and ambiguous pleasures of true art.

BERNARD SHAW
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ARNOLD SILVER

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

# Vanguard Meets the Mainstream

As the 1981–82 season got under way, economics and creative inertia appeared to have overtaken the avant-garde. After nearly two decades of development, the postmodern dancers, whom we have most associated with protest, resistance to tradition, the smashing of old forms and the devising of new ones, are now veterans, possessors of companies and reputations, of managers and disciples and literary apologists. What they have that the modern dancers whom they deposed did not have is a high degree of public visibility. If not precisely popular, the so-called postmoderns have gained access to the culture's most official modes of recognition—the news media, the opera house, and public subsidy—a condition that never was enjoyed by this country's first generation of dance revolutionaries. The reasons for this shift are, I think, largely extra-artistic; just because Laura Dean is on television, we aren't necessarily becoming more sensitive to experimental dance. In fact, the successes of Philip Glass's opera *Satyagraha* and Twyla Tharp's rock-allegory *The Catherine Wheel* suggest that our concept of avant-garde needs redefinition.

Postmodernism is probably the most important development in dance since the early 1930s, when Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and others formulated the anti-balletic approaches to composition and movement that collectively came to be known as modern dance. Although the term postmodernism is already in dispute, I am using it loosely, to mean the whole tendency to break with what were perceived as the worn-out and decadent conventions of modern dance. Not just the rebellion of one individual against his teachers or the refurbishing of frayed ideas, it was a radical break and one that spread across a whole generation. For a while new choreographers were saying no to everything, including choreography. During the '70s this phase quickly passed. Technique, formal structure, narrative, character, even emotion returned, purged of romanticism, couched in vernacular idioms, and relieved of the modern dance's psychological freight. The initial negation, shock and anarchy became a basis for the development of new forms, even new formalisms.

The postmodern revolution occurred at a time when the performing arts were being given every inducement to partake of mainstream opportunities. Purposely or by accident, the improvement of the dancers' lot defused much of the political unrest that triggered their rebellion. Federal, state and local subsidies got

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spread to a wide diversity of artists, and in turn spread their work to a less specialized public than they might have attracted without assistance. Public and private subsidy brought the art of the salon and the loft—as well as the art of the opera house—into everyone's television set, and suddenly an audience of a few dozens or a few hundreds grew to millions. The television age has brought about the fusion of two previously irreconcilable concepts: high art and mass art effected a merger.

At first this process had nothing to do with the artists: it was a function of production, distribution and marketing. The costs of art were once borne by the upper classes, who then could keep their protégés as more or less private ornaments. Now arts subvention was largely taken over by public agencies, and the new taxpayer-patrons got to have "their" culture by tuning in Live From Lincoln Center or mobbing the Picasso exhibition or building their own little Lincoln Centers with their own little ballet companies right there in River City. This kind of art producing is simultaneously elitist and populist, exclusive and democratic. It seems to hold out the possibility of serious work being done, serious ideas being dealt with, certainly serious community events being brought forth, but in fact the size and diverseness of the audience, the cost, the built-in drag associated with institutional planning, scheduling and subscription campaigns, all bring about a leveling of the art process, a fixing of values that should be flexible, a protecting and hardening of aesthetic realities. The artist working in this climate doesn't deliberately set out to talk down, but he must be conscious of accessibility.

One of the most interesting changes wrought in this period is the growth of the audience's capacity to perceive art work. Twenty years ago the ballet and the modern dance had virtually separate audiences. There were certain proprieties, certain contractual niceties to be observed between dancers and audiences. And there was the assumption that dancing was definitely an acquired taste. Very much as a result of the postmodern revolution, there's a great deal more range in the forms, activities, messages that popular dance can offer now. We've had rock ballets, nude ballets, homosexual ballets, protest ballets, and even postmodern ballets. No movement language seems too precious for today's dance audience; no ideology too threatening.

And since this is true, it isn't unusual to find the experimentally-based postmodern dancers working in highly visible situations. With the expansion of the dance audience has come a need for material. Dance is a field in which recovering old works is difficult; no historical repertory exists that can automatically feed the producing organizations as opera or symphonic repertory sustains the music establishment. New choreography is the lifeblood of dance on every level from the traditional to the far-out. The postmoderns, being instinctively more resourceful and original than anyone, are gradu-

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ally being sought to supply the ballet repertory. And while the legitimate theater continues to flounder, Tharp produces a month of her own at Broadway's Winter Garden. And the Brooklyn Academy decides that it is more practical to present four "Next Wave" artists in its 2,000-seat opera house than to afford them the leeway of the smaller, less economically productive, nontraditional room where they have performed in the past, the Lepercq Space.

At least one artist refused Brooklyn Academy's invitation, but Laura Dean, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs and Philip Glass accepted. All of them offered works that enlarged on very simple ideas for which they first gained attention. With the exception of Brown, who treated the situation as she would any theater performance and whose plain, close-around-the-body dances emerged somewhat diminished in scale, they all multiplied various aspects of their work. The length, number of participants, production values mounted to epic proportions in the case of Glass. It's not inappropriate that this should happen. Dean, Childs and Glass have all worked with incremental material. Structure in their works is based on repetition, the setting up of ostinato rhythms that become hypnotically predictable. The power and shape of the work depends on how these rhythms are changed. Dean's work shifts suddenly in large blocks, from one movement pattern and floor design to another, and the length of the interval between changes becomes an issue. Glass and Childs work with making inner changes: shifting rhythms within a steady pulse create coloristic effects and sometimes disturbingly unpredictable and subtle dissonances.

What many experimentalists of the '70s responded to was their need, and ours, for uninterrupted time, to think, to meditate, to absorb the essence of an event. Cycles, loops, phasing, and numerical repetition were all devices that relieved postmodern dance and music of the excitations found in traditional development-climax-recapitulation structures. Glass's opera about Gandhi had all the trappings of spectacle, and this too is a legitimate product of minimalism, contradictory though that may seem. Robert Wilson's productions of the '70s demonstrated that by inducing a dream state in the viewer with an almost static, prolonged and minutely changing visual scene, he could make the most remarkable things happen, the most incongruous clash of elements seem plausible.

*Satyagraha* arrived in Brooklyn after its delirious reception in Europe had been ratified by the American critics at Artpark last summer. The sold-out audiences in Brooklyn impressed Village Voice critic Gregory Sandow as being made up of "the people who talk about Werner Herzog and Twyla Tharp . . . sophisticated people who don't normally pay attention to classical music," and Sandow thought this was because the work represented just the infusion of new ideas that classical music needs. It seems more likely to me that

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*Satyagraha*'s appeal indicates Glass's increasing conventionality, rather than his innovativeness.

*Satyagraha* offered an unbeatable mix of cultural caché and safety, with its large, beautiful and tastefully uncluttered staging; its Handelian-sized orchestra and chorus; its churchy, chordal, and always resolved harmonics; and its easy-to-comprehend action centering around high-minded characters and historical dilemmas. Far from being obscure, the work used many of the devices of conventional opera to achieve typically operatic effects: realistic gestures, poses, props; massed choruses that traveled in formations to produce a collective and disciplined sound; and tableau-like arias interspersed with descriptive but non-sung activity. There were spectacular engines—a printing press, two wagons bearing effigies of Hindu gods—that you got to look at long enough to apprehend their symbolic as well as their decorative value. And brooding above the main action there was in each act a different presence—Tolstoy, Tagore and Martin Luther King—a character not directly involved with the plot but symbolic of some philosophical connection to past, present or future.

In fact, the only element in *Satyagraha* that represented a radical departure from the known practices of spectacle was time, which Glass uses in extremely altered ways. Not only is the musical line conceived as a multiple of small repeated units, but the extended length of each musical idea gives the effect of stopping time, or attenuating it into some intangible other dimension—history, or even thought. The slow, meditative pace and the pictorial staging were derived from Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*, on which Glass collaborated, and other Wilson epics. But Wilson's visual effects are staggering in their inventiveness, weird and gigantic and often totally cryptic. Nothing in *Satyagraha* even comes close to being theatrically daring, not after the precedents set by Wilson. People who even now would find Wilson outrageous see a house built onstage in *Satyagraha*, but it represents only the building of a house. I remember the ominous, irrational force of Wilson's images: the gradual, inexplicable burning down of a house in *Deafman Glance*; the mad-atomic-computer-assembly-line at the end of *Einstein*.

One more thing about *Satyagraha* that seemed regressive to me was its politics. The story was about Gandhi's pacifist efforts to abolish discrimination against Indian nationals in South Africa before World War I. In the final scene, workers stage a sit-in and are carried off unresisting by government troops. Then they're apotheosized as a crowd of onlookers, or a heavenly choir, at the assassination of Martin Luther King. You don't have to know anything about Gandhi to realize that his protests have had little lasting effect on racism in South Africa. And the race wars are far from won in America, too. In 1981, it seems to me, we can only look at the liberating efforts of the '70s with irony. The martyrdom of these men

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accomplished little except to give us the satisfaction of glorifying them now. Nonviolent protest is as politically dead and safe in the '80s as Prohibition, which makes it a perfect pseudo-issue for the mass theater. Who could be against it?

Politically and in quite a few other ways, Twyla Tharp slips it to the middle class in *The Catherine Wheel.* Slick and provocative and insidious, the piece throws our hedonism in our faces, shows it to us for the attractive, pernicious force it is. The main elements of *The Catherine Wheel* are staples of pop culture: a loud, nagging rock score by David Byrne; a battery of feverish effects—lights, glitter, smoke; knockout dancing of the highest technical quality and the meanest intensity; and a cast of characters that sets a slapstick family of libertines against a sinister, abstract corps de ballet. Entertainment, 1980s style. But beneath the high-tech and the punchy laughter is a deep alienation, a sense of betrayal and futility, and finally a presentiment of a hyperactive if not blissful tomorrow.

The family members go in for self-gratification, from sex to aggression, and carry on in the most violent way imaginable even when they're making love. They're lured by a vision of pleasure, a golden pineapple that grows bigger the more they play with it. Sara Rudner as the leader of the chorus first plucks it out of a golden pineapple bush, worshipping it like a holy object, then letting it loose to incite the family. Later the most innocent of the characters, the Poet, plays with it the way the Blackamoor in *Petrouchka* plays with his coconut-totem. But it's clearly an evil spirit, not a benevolent one, and everyone's desires are eventually frustrated, if only because there's a bigger pineapple just around the bend. The violence escalates into orgiastic battles, until the parents do a dance of resignation, as if they admit this has been going on since the beginning of time and will continue. Rudner seems satisfied. She returns the pineapple to its golden altar, and magically the characters and the chorus reappear dressed in golden costumes. They dance a long coda with breakneck speed and cruel virtuosity. No longer violent, they're still driven. A bleak sort of optimism but perhaps a realistic one.

*The Catherine Wheel* is disruptive, jarring. The story of the family doesn't proceed in consecutive episodes or even intelligibly sequential ones. For an intermissionless hour and twenty minutes it attacks us in bouts of interrupted, overlapping narrative. Sometimes it's foreshadowed by silhouettes projected on screens behind the action. Sometimes it's commented on and given an even more hostile and depersonalized meaning by the chorus. Intricate, precision-tooled machines with unknown functions hover overhead. Stage drapes fly up and down constantly, slicing up the space which has already been mined with twenty-four metal poles as high as the proscenium. Things get thrown through the air and left littering the floor.

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Costumes are made of layered, unidentifiable garments, like ragamuffin-dancer attire exaggerated until their movement is hidden and obstructed. Whether acting or dancing, the performers work at higher than necessary levels; they mug, fidget, ram into the movement, rage to be heard. Tharp is turning the postmodern dictum of impassivity inside out. You don't want to get to love these dancers, she seems to suggest. But instead of making them "objective" or "neutral," she makes them so over-expressive that we have to keep them at a distance or be flattened by their power.

Throughout the twentieth century, theater styles have tended to swing from naturalism to artificiality, although Broadway and television have adhered consistently to the naturalistic mode stemming from Stanislavsky's theories of acting. In *Satyagraha*, despite formal structures, Glass is edging toward naturalism. His literal treatment of the plot, the affecting though restrained performance of Douglas Perry as Gandhi, and the general lack of strangeness or dislocation make us feel comfortable, even involved. *The Catherine Wheel*, on the other hand, is a very firm statement of nonrealism, a new kind of expressionism perhaps. Certainly the piece is more allied to Brecht, Kurt Jooss or George Grosz than to Dickens or Antony Tudor or even Jiri Kylian. Tharp doesn't want to encourage our sympathy or stroke our certitudes. She wants to make us angry, batter our senses. She doesn't want to put us to sleep, she wants to wake us up. It's astonishing that some dancers think she's gone commercial, and that commercial audiences think she's such a kick. *The Catherine Wheel* continues Tharp's long career of subversion. If she's turned gloomy and down on the culture, maybe it's time for us to do the same.

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CHARLES W. MILLARD

# Arshile Gorky

ARSHILE GORKY (BORN VOSDANIK ADOIAN) came from his native Armenia to the United States in 1920, when he was fifteen. By the winter of 1922, he was attending the New School of Design in Boston, where he had settled, and in late 1924 he moved to New York. One of the few paintings surviving from his Boston years, during which he became an assistant instructor of life drawing, is *Park Street Church, Boston* of 1924. Vaguely reminiscent of the work of Childe Hassam, this tiny picture is worked out in a grayed Impressionist palette suggesting certain works by Pissarro and Sisley. Coloristically rich and subtle, it is strongly organized not only by the emphatic presence of the church's profile, but also by the obvious brushwork that criss-crosses the sky and is laid on in clear diagonal strokes across the middle and foreground. After a brief flirtation with the Academy of Design immediately upon his arrival in New York, Gorky entered the Grand Central School of Art late in 1925, becoming instructor of the sketch class there and, in the fall of 1926, a full faculty member for evening instruction in the life and antique classes. He was to remain on the school faculty until 1931. Throughout this period he painted in a strongly Cézannesque manner, although one of the earlier surviving pictures of the time, *Still Life* of 1927, is remarkably prescient in its rounded formal simplifications. Its brushwork, clearly derived from the French master, is much broader and more slashing than that of Cézanne, and its strong diagonal presence organizes the picture much in the manner of the brushwork of *Park Street Church.* Generally speaking, however, Gorky was more faithful to Cézanne's style, as well as to his subject matter, painting landscapes, portraits, and still lives, many with fruit and at least one with a skull. The paint in these canvases is laid on in small, parallel strokes, and objects tend to be crowded forward toward the picture plane. This crowding may be accomplished, as in *Still Life with Skull,* by presenting objects against a heavily figured ground, or, as in *Pears, Peaches, and Pitcher,* by tipping the table on which they are placed forward and downward. It may also be abetted, as in *Untitled* (*Landscape*), by activating the brushwork of the background and raising its value slightly so that what would normally be perceived as distance seems to insinuate itself between elements in the foreground. The color range of these pictures was also faithful to Cézanne, running to blue, green, and ochre in the landscapes, and to softened and grayed versions of those hues, sparked with modulated yellow and red, in the still lives.

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The delicate application and subtle shifts of hue and value in *Pears, Peaches, and Pitcher* show how completely Gorky mastered the French painter's style at this time. It is not without interest that in this composition, rather than allowing the forward edge and corners of the table to show as Cézanne would have done, Gorky has allowed the tabletop to occupy the entire lower half of the picture, dividing it from side to side like a horizon.

By the time of *Landscape* (1930s), Gorky was interpreting Cézanne's style with great breadth, and the armature of tree and ground in his landscapes had resolved itself into an open linear pattern structuring broadly applied color areas whose thickened strokes occupy its interstices. There is a clear move in *Landscape* toward abstraction of a modified analytical Cubist type that suggests certain transitional pictures by Mondrian. Nor is this the only departure from Cézanne to appear by the '30s. *Self-Portrait* (c. 1928–31) shows clear knowledge of the Fauve Matisse in its crude, expressionist colors (yellow-inflected greens, deep blue and purple), its heavy black outlining, its thick, irregularly patterned brushwork, and its suppression of continuous shading. Similarly, an awareness of Braque's style is evident in some still lives of about 1928. One of these (collection Mrs. Jean Bijur Weiss) clearly recalls the French Cubist's later manner in its ambient outlines and in the softened greens, grays, and browns of its palette. Another (collection Mrs. M. Victor Leventritt) evidences synthetic Cubist planar simplifications and overlappings even more dramatically, while a third (collection University of Texas Art Museum, Austin) boldly introduces large areas of fairly saturated expressionist color (red, blue, green) that suggest something of Hans Hofmann's later use of similar hues. The strongest influence to emerge in Gorky's work during the 1930s, and the one that was to replace Cézanne's on a long-term basis, was that of Picasso. *Still Life* of 1929–32, with its muted reddish brown and mustard color harmony played off against black and white and its large biomorphic overlapping planes, clearly pays homage to the style the Spaniard had brought out of synthetic Cubism, notably in such works as *Musical Instruments on a Table* (1926). In *Still Life,* line is banished in favor of edge, the contrasting tones of the overlapping planes creating sharp profiles at their junctions, and all the pictorial elements are laid flat on the surface of the canvas. The biomorphic forms of the highly abstracted still life itself are played off against the irregular geometrical, largely rectangular, contours of the table and ground against which they are set, compacting toward the center of the composition, which opens out toward its edges. This effect is more pronounced in *Blue Figure in Chair* of about 1931, in which the crush of central biomorphic elements is set against a ground broken into clearly defined rectangles, emphasized (and brought forward visually) by being worked out in such assertive colors as lime green. Linear drawing also reappears

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in this picture, both to outline its forms and as a decorative arabesque reminiscent of the patterns of iron railing that appear in some of Picasso's paintings. The height of Picasso's influence on Gorky at this time is to be seen in *Painting* of about 1932 which, while not larger in size than some of the preceding works, is considerably larger in scale. Clearly a human figure, its rounded and overlapping forms, the softened sawtooth of its profile face interpenetrated by the ground against which it is seen in an ambiguous spatial relationship, and the parallel strokes filling the ovoid area near the top center, are all taken over directly from the Spanish master and show Gorky to have assimilated his style as thoroughly as he had done that of Cézanne.

Gorky was always an intense and accomplished draftsman, and in a series of India ink drawings on paper executed during 1931–2 he explored the composition that was to culminate in *Nighttime, Enigma, and Nostalgia* in 1933–4. The biomorphic elements in these drawings are concentrated toward the center of the sheet, spreading out laterally against rectangular grounds, as if against the table on which still life elements would be set. Organized around the value contrasts between the ink and the bare paper, the drawings are characterized by rich ranges of black, embodied in an apparently infinite variety of cross hatching. The forms themselves seem carved out of the network of this hatching, and are profoundly sculptural in effect without in any way traducing the two-dimensionality of their medium. They grow out of certain earlier drawings indebted to the neo-Classical Picasso and relate to some of Picasso's contemporary sculpture studies, as well as evoking the abstracting biomorphism of such sculptors as Henry Moore. Certain of the more open and compartmented drawings, such as that owned by the Art Institute of Chicago, prefigure work by Jackson Pollock, both in style and composition. After the major statement of this theme in painting—*Nighttime, Enigma, and Nostalgia,* a sombre picture worked out in close valued gray, black, and brown played off against off-white—the elements in Gorky's drawings became increasingly discrete, and by 1932–4 many were clearly identifiable as heads, columns, arrows, etc. The seemingly illogical juxtapositions of these recognizable features suggest Gorky's interest in Surrealism, typified in the vaguely metaphysical, Chiricoesque *Untitled* of about 1936 (collection Christopher C. Schwabacher). Although the theoretical freedom of Surrealism was attractive to Gorky, and his work was later to be admired by the Surrealists, who would have liked to claim him as one of their own, he was not deceived as to its true nature. "Surrealism," he wrote, "is academic art under disguise and anti-aesthetic and suspicious of excellence and largely in opposition to modern art."

Alongside the heavily worked drawings of the early and middle '30s there appeared others of an open and delicate linearism sug-

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gesting Matisse or the neo-Classical Picasso of the years around 1920. This style devolved into a representational manner in Gorky's painting characterized by simplified and rounded forms placed over and against one another almost as abstractions (a device clearly derived from synthetic Cubism), but defining, in their juxtaposition, arms, heads, etc. A series of portraits from the middle and later 1930s is carried out in this manner, notably a self-portrait of about 1937 and the *Portrait of Master Bill,* worked on from 1929 until 1939. In them, Gorky's mastery of color becomes fully apparent. Applied with a thin, light, and open touch that once again shows his debt to Cézanne, the hues—soft greens, grays, beiges, brown-reds, and purple-blues—are grayed and subtly juxtaposed and overlaid. The culmination of this style is to be seen in the two versions of *The Artist and His Mother,* one worked on between 1926 and 1936 (collection Whitney Museum of American Art) and one between 1929 and 1942 (collection National Gallery of Art). The Washington version is the more successful of the two, its hues and values less contrasted, its forms and internal modulations more simplified, the features of its figures more mask-like and less shaded, and its brushwork more open. Extremely evocative iconographically, it is masterfully executed and one of Gorky's most powerful achievements.

While Gorky's art was clearly moving toward larger scale and greater openness during the 1930s—was, in sum, increasingly daring and ambitious—it continued to be informed by his knowledge of the work of other artists, and many of the paintings of the mid to later '30s, several of them large both in size and scale, still evidence his debt to Picasso. In *Composition with Head,* for example, a broad linear web spreads across the canvas outlining geometrical shapes that are filled in with a coruscated paint surface so thick it seems carved out rather than brushed on. Jagged forms interlock in a structure derived from synthetic Cubism, a structure sometimes heavily compacted (*Abstraction,* c. 1936) and sometimes opened out so that the forms seem to float against their ground (*Xhorkom,* 1936). Color may be either brilliant and expressionist, as in *Abstraction,* whose intense reds, blues, and yellows are played off against orange, or more mixed, as in *Xhorkom,* with its delicate purples, modulated greens, and mustards. Not infrequently, Gorky's brilliant color is emphasized by being given larger pictorial areas than his more reticent hues. *Enigmatic Combat* (c. 1936–7) is a summary of the work of this period, its densely layered and heavily outlined forms filled in with textured surfaces relieved by hues of extreme delicacy, both in themselves and in their relationships.

In August of 1935 Gorky became part of the Federal Arts Project and was assigned to execute murals for Newark Airport. Working on a small scale, he turned to Léger for an example of decorative form and, in an untitled study, produced a composition of simplified geometrical shapes, some obviously mechanical in reference

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and a few shaded to suggest roundness, that was clearly derived from the Frenchman. Atypically for Gorky, some of these broad areas, notably the angled stripes at the left of the composition, run off the canvas, substantially increasing the scale of the work. The final murals, in which the realistic references of many of the drawn studies are suppressed in favor of large abstract areas, are indebted to Léger principally in their straightforward color, applied flat. Their structure derives from Picasso's synthetic Cubism and Miró's free-floating forms. They are the largest works undertaken by Gorky and, although not among his finest accomplishments, are impressive and coherent. Miró's appearance at this important juncture in Gorky's career is to be seen most clearly in the pivotal *Garden in Sochi* series produced in the early '40s. First studied in a gouache of 1940–1, the composition recurs in gouache and painting until 1943. Its forms—irregular rectangles intruding from the edge of the canvas, antic biomorphic shapes that are sometimes softly osseous, dotted configurations, and linear star patterns—are borrowed directly from the Catalan, as are the colors in some versions (clear blues, reds, and a good deal of black). Without concealing this influence, the 1941 painting of the theme (Museum of Modern Art) makes it entirely Gorky's own by its personal colorism (purple and soft yellow against olive green), its texture, now tending to smooth out, and its use of light and dark contrast not for shading but for overall organization. By the time of the 1943 version, Gorky had arrived at his final, mature style, thinning his paint, brushing it on freely and obviously, using a fine line to describe or connect shapes, and allowing figure and ground to interpenetrate. The result, while simple in appearance, is pictorially complex and highly sophisticated, and represents a transformation of contemporary European master painting that was to be Gorky's major artistic legacy.

The middle years of the Second World War, 1942–3, were not the best time for Gorky's art. Although he produced a quantity of impressive drawings, his paintings were often unconvincing, tending either toward structural weakness (*The Pirate I,* 1942) or toward an overemphasis, particularly of color, that results in a crudity rare for him (*Waterfall,* c. 1943, collection the Tate Gallery). By 1944 his artistic difficulties were largely over, and from then until the end of his life in 1948, despite catastrophic personal problems, his painting unfolded in an extraordinary way. Since Gorky continued to experiment with almost all the ideas he had absorbed during the previous two decades, bringing out of them successful paintings of widely divergent character, it is difficult to identify a dominant stylistic trend during these years. *Good Afternoon, Mrs. Lincoln* (1944) is a picture of the most reticent and delicate sort, almost a large drawing, in which color is kept to a minimum and toned down throughout, except for a dominant area of green at the top right center. A fine line is used to describe biomorphic shapes that melt into one anoth-

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er, transforming Cubist structure into something more holistic. The centered horizontal organization of these shapes, typical of late Gorky, suggests landscape in its breadth rather than still life, and the entire composition is characterized by a continuous, pulsing openness that is neither atmospheric nor layered. By contrast, *The Sun, The Dervish in the Tree* (1944) is vibrant with color that owes a great deal to Kandinsky—juxtapositions of red and yellow, rough color areas surrounded by haloes of contrasting hue—and line plays only a subordinate part, independent of the color areas with which it is interwoven. The richness and complexity of these various effects is epitomized in *One Year the Milkweed* (1944), a picture in which thin washes of color drip and run down the surface of the canvas, structured by only a minimum of line and by biomorphic areas of unpainted canvas that interweave with the paint surface on top of them. The resulting play of figure-ground relationships and the tonal coherence of the painting's green-brown-violet color scheme, sparked with red, give this marvellously fragile work rock-solid structural coherence. But the major work of 1944, the largest easel picture Gorky painted and probably his greatest work, is *The Liver is the Cock's Comb.* In it, Kandinsky's influence is particularly apparent, especially in the long blue oval enclosed in rings of black and red at the lower left, although Gorky is a considerably suaver and more disciplined master than Kandinsky. The simultaneous freedom and organizational coherence of *The Liver is the Cock's Comb* give it a relaxed complexity characteristic of the finest works of art. Its brillant color—blue, red, yellow—tends to be localized, and is interwoven with, and played off against, a warm brown "ground" and large areas of thinly brushed white. Although drawing is used to describe shape, the shapes described do not emerge from the ground but interpenetrate it, enhancing the picture's continuous fabric. The consequent transformation of Cubist structure suggests new pictorial premisses that were to be explored in depth by American painting of the succeeding two decades.

From 1944 until Gorky's death in 1948, his painting exploited this transformed structure in increasingly subtle ways. The series of biomorphic forms described by his wiry, flexible, and delicate line became less compact, the forms themselves more individually distinct and larger in scale. His color became less intense, richer, and more mixed, and was applied in increasingly thinner and brushier ways. Its importance to his art is clearly apparent in two pairs of compositions in which one version is largely monochrome, the other worked out in rich violets, softened yellows, and grayed neutral tones—*Charred Beloved I* and *II* (1946), and *The Betrothal I* and *II* (1947). In both cases, the colored compositions are superior. A final influence on Gorky is to be seen in such pictures as *Apple Orchard* (1943–6), *Painting* (1944), and the large drawing entitled *Summation* (1947). Certain biomorphic forms in these works, especially those in

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*Summation* suggesting movement, are borrowed from Matta, whose work was much in evidence in New York during these years and who was working with a pictorial structure not unlike Gorky's. Gorky was, however, far and away the better artist, and the finest works of his last years are those in which he most rigorously pursued his own genius—*The Plow and the Song* (1947), *Agony* (1947), and *The Orators* (1947) preeminent among them. By the end of his life he had too thoroughly synthesized his own style to be able to make the most effective use of direct borrowing, particularly from painters less good than he.

Although not the first or only American artist to be affected by the contemporary European revolution in painting, Gorky was the first American modernist of international stature, and it is he who forms the true artistic bridge from Europe to the United States. While other artists had made use of and been influenced by European modernism, none before Gorky had dared to challenge it qualitatively, or had pushed so far beyond it in adapting it to the exigencies of an American vision. Always a painter in the European master tradition, one who cared deeply about his craft and about coloristic and compositional subtlety, he transformed that tradition into a new vehicle that was to serve as a point of departure for Americans who matured during the Second World War. Deeply as he steeped himself in the art of others (and the masters he chose were themselves an index of his ambition—Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Miró) he was never a *pasticheur*, but always brought painting of quality and substance out of the art of those who influenced him. His work clearly demonstrates that what matters is not what or how much an artist takes from others but what he does with what he takes. In Gorky's hands, as in those of any first-rate artist, borrowing was a means to artistic quality and, therefore, to originality. Since quality always constitutes the true novelty of art—only quality is eternally new and perpetually surprising—Gorky can accurately be said to have been the most innovative painter of his time and place, one of those to whom subsequent art of consequence is most deeply indebted.

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# Reviews

MONROE K. SPEARS

## Recovering the Past

As most readers probably know by now, the editing of these letters[1] was such a formidable task and their publishing such a monumental project that the former required nearly fifty years and the latter nearly 4,000 pages in six large volumes. Since the letters contain no significant new material bearing on the political or intellectual history of the period, some readers may have wondered if the whole enterprise was worth what it took. My own answer, after prolonged immersion in the letters, is a resounding yes. Though the individual letters are hardly ever remarkable (none of the correspondents has any literary interest or ability, or is much inclined to introspection), collectively the letters produce a vivid picture of the lives of ordinary people in Tudor England. They would not produce this picture for modern readers, however, without the magnificent work of the editor. The commentary is as long as the text, and it needs to be, to reveal how startlingly like us in many ways these people were, and how strangely unlike in others. The dull duty of an editor, in this case incredibly extensive and laborious, is made exciting by this editor's intelligence, sensitivity, and imaginativeness. Muriel St. Clare Byrne's success in digging up the past and bringing it back to life is the result, however, not only of her personal gifts but also of the clarity with which she defines the aims and methods of her work.

Having firmly established her aim as the serving not of specialized or merely antiquarian (and therefore ultimately trivial) interests, but rather of the human interests best satisfied by making the Letters generally accessible, Miss Byrne proceeds to justify the two methodological consequences which follow from this decision. The first is *selection*: she prints about two-thirds of the 3,000 letters and other documents, not simply skimming the cream but preserving the representative qualities of the whole. Letters in French she translates into the English of the period. Finally, and most audaciously, she *modernizes* spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and capitalization. Tudor practice in these matters being as variable, eccen-

[1] THE LISLE LETTERS, ed. by *Muriel St. Clare Byrne*. The University of Chicago Press. 6 volumes. $300.00.

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tric, and enigmatic as it was, and the handwriting of the period being equally so, to modernize means to state an opinion of what the text means; and Miss Byrne eloquently expounds this view of the editor's responsibility. "It is a main part of the editor's business to form opinions and to have the courage to state them: to take the risk of being wrong." In this as in other matters, she cites to great effect Samuel Johnson's enunciation of the same principles: "I have not passed over, with affected superiority, what is equally difficult to the reader and to myself" and "To an editor nothing is a trifle by which his author is obscured."

Unlike some antiquarians, Miss Byrne has a sophisticated awareness of the difficulty of recovering the past. Information and documents, places and buildings, material objects like tables and chairs, are helpful but remain unsatisfying. Even great literature does not make us intimate with "the ordinariness of life in another age," though to understand this literature, she argues, you must understand the England in which it is rooted. To bring it alive, to recapture the moment and all its immediacy, we must make the stilled voices speak again. To accomplish this is the controlling purpose of her editing. In pursuing it, she does not hesitate to flout the superstitious reverence that historians sometimes feel for documents: as we have seen, she selects and modernizes her texts. Nor does she expect the text to work upon the reader in some supernatural fashion, without intermediary; as we have also seen, her commentary and notes bulk at least as large as the text itself. They bring the past alive because they are written with a lively awareness of the present and with a broad and humane concern for the whole sweep of history. Thus, for example, Henry VIII is seen in the light of later dictators and terrorists: "The brutalities of imprisonment, torture, and execution were no more excessive in England than elsewhere in the sixteenth century. But the calculated use of terrorism—State trials with foregone conclusions and condemnation without trial, the apparatus of tyranny and the suppression of free opinion and judgment—is the familiar pattern to deterrence which we have recognized with horror and detestation in our own time when the brutalities of the sixteenth century have been rivalled and even exceeded throughout Europe."

Since these are the letters of unremarkable people going about the business of everyday life, their interest is at the opposite pole from that of letters of great artists or of people who played a part in world-shaking events. The closest analogy is to the Paston and Verney collections, both of which, however, cover much longer periods of time and feature less likeable correspondents. When Arthur Lisle, Lord Deputy of Calais, was imprisoned on suspicion of treason in 1540, all his papers in Calais—family as well as official correspondence and documents—were seized. Through fortunate historical accident, they were preserved intact after his acquittal and

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death in 1542. Since they all date from the seven years during which Lisle had been in Calais, they present a picture of daily life in unrivalled fullness of detail, as it was lived both in Calais and in England. The central characters are Arthur Lisle, his wife Honor, and their man of business, John Husee. I have called them "ordinary" as compared to people of great note in the world, but they emerge as kind, able, conscientious, and likeable; and whether or not these qualities are ordinary is a question upon which opinions differ. Perhaps the most surprising thing in the correspondence is that the letters exchanged between Arthur and Honor during temporary separations in 1538 and 1539 reveal that they, though both twice-married and long past their youth, were passionately in love; and their letters at this point come vividly alive. (Obviously, opinions differ also upon the degree of rarity of this experience; but since marriage at this time in these circles was primarily a political or business transaction, it is certainly unexpected here.)

Arthur Plantagenet, Viscount Lisle, was the bastard son of Edward IV and uncle of Henry VIII. His birth date is unknown; what evidence there is serves only to fix 1462 as the earliest and 1483 as the latest possible time. Miss Byrne's one implausible conclusion as editor is that she insists on the earliest of these dates as most probable. This would make Arthur 75–76 when the love-letters were written. Though entirely on the side of love against old age, and certainly not inclined to dogmatize about what is possible in advanced years, I must say that these letters (to be quoted shortly) sound like the work of a considerably younger man. At any rate, Arthur was universally liked for his "gentle heart" and "great humanity"; he was a favorite of Henry VIII early in his reign, and was married by him to the Lisle heiress, by whom he had three daughters. Four years after she died in 1525, he married Honor.

Honor Grenville had been left a widow the preceding year (1528), after thirteen years of marriage and seven children. Miss Byrne describes her as "one of those small women who generally marry tall husbands—a neat, compact, and dignified little person, cleverer than Lisle and a born manager." Her correspondence, Miss Byrne says, provides the most comprehensive account available of the noble lady of the time. "She reflects in quite a remarkable manner the difference between the theory of woman's place in the scheme of things, as set forth in the mass of sixteenth-century treatises . . . , and the reality." Theoretically and legally, the woman is a negative concept, suppressing herself and completely subordinated to the male; but in practice things were quite different. Honor had a forceful personality, together with great charm; as everyone recognized, she was tougher than Arthur. (An acquaintance remarked that "with a few words and a present of a penny he would have his lordship's good will, so that my lady was not in the way.") She was also more efficient, in matters of business or preferment. (Miss

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Byrne is at pains to prove that Arthur was not really ineffectual and bungling, as other historians have accused him of being; but he was certainly affable and easy to a fault, trustful, extravagant, and neglectful of his own interests.) While Honor had no real education—she never even learned French—she was decisive, charitable, and energetic. She did most of the letter-writing and was sometimes called My Lady Deputy; those who wanted things done addressed her rather than Arthur. She maintained discipline and could be sharp-tongued, but she was generous and tender-hearted.

Finally, John Husee (or Hussey; his family had been in Sussex since the twelfth century), who handled all the Lisles' business—legal, financial, and personal. He was not a steward but a gentleman; Lisle calls him "my friend John Husee" and "Gentle Husee." He protected the Lisles, who were too simple and direct for the world of rivalry and intrigue. As Miss Byrne comments, their honesty and lack of guile "won Husee's devoted service, and is at one and the same time the delight of his heart and the despair of his practical common sense." Only 27 when the correspondence begins, he knew exactly how the system worked, and "had the whole business of 'suits,' and the art of 'waiting' upon the great ones of the earth at his finger tips. . . . he knew, as well as anyone outside the inner circle of power could know, what was likely to happen, and could often see one move ahead. . . . In his judgment of men and affairs he grows more shrewd every year; but in spite of his perpetual dealings with those in great place, his own outlook on life never loses its disarming candour and generosity." In many respects, Husee is the most remarkable and delightful character in the Letters.

Miss Byrne sums up the kinds of interest and importance the Letters have under three categories. The first is linguistic and literary: the Letters provide extensive specimens of the language written in the 1530s (and at this period there seems to be little difference between the spoken and written languages) by people of virtually all classes, ages, and occupations. Linguistically, the Letters "catch the vernacular in its first truly modern phase, uncontaminated by the conscious excitement of literary experiment, while it is still 'the native speech of a populace.' " They suggest "that the basic expansion of vocabulary which is generally attributed to the last quarter of the century had already happened in the first quarter," and that the stylistic features usually held to be characteristically Elizabethan "are all anticipated in the writing of ordinary men who were not consciously endeavouring to write better than they talked." Miss Byrne is particularly eloquent on this topic, and her generalizations are supported by specialized studies she has published earlier as well as by the present edition. Since "the printed books of 1500 to 1580 are mainly critical or polemical," the "tremendous outburst of creative writing at the end of the century which we call Elizabethan literature seems to have happened overnight"; whereas the truth is that

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the speech of the people in these letters shows that the "language was ready, waiting for the touch of that 'heavenly alchemy' to reveal the fullness of its golden splendour." In this pre-literary, pre-1549 Prayer Book period, "before the vernacular had become critically and aesthetically self-conscious," when it was, as Florio says, " 'so written as it is spoken and such upon the paper as it is in the mouth,' " this is " 'the tongue that Shakespeare spake,' " and hence one important use of the Letters is to enable us to see better the relation of everyday speech to the speech of Shakespeare's plays. Many points of detail in Shakespeare are clarified by the Letters—for example, how fast a Tudor gentleman wore out shoes, explaining Hamlet's "A little month, or ere those shoes were old / With which she followed my poor father's body"; or what is meant by "wearing papers" in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Miss Byrne also likes to point out the resemblances between Honor and such Shakespeare heroines as Portia. Although the Lisles were certainly not literary—the only book they owned was a Bible—and there are only two letters from literary men (Sir Thomas Elyot and Sir Thomas Wyat) and no mention of any literary work, the Letters do thus have a considerable indirect literary relevance.

Even the formal or conventional language of the period is vivid. Instead of tamely addressing a letter, one might exhort the bearer, "Haste! Haste! Haste! For thy life!" One might write to an in-law, "As heartily as may be with pen expressed, my duty done, I humbly recommend me to you, and so doth your gentle sister my loving bedfellow; and I would we might be heartily recommended to my good Lord your bedfellow." In closing one invoked at least one member of the Trinity: "And thus Jesu preserve your lordship and my singular good lady always to continue in honour" or "And thus the Holy Trinity ever preserve your good lordship. . . ."

But in the "central treasure" of the Letters, the correspondence between Arthur and Honor when temporarily separated in 1538 and 1539, one hears a completely different tone: this is the true voice of feeling. Honor begins, writing from England: "Mine own sweet heart, This shall be to advertise you that I have had a goodly and fair passage. . . . I thank God I was but once sick in all the way; and after that I was merry and well, and should have been much merrier if I had been coming towards you, or if you had been with me. Your absence and my departure maketh heavy, also for that I departed at the stair in Calais so hastily without taking my leave of you accordingly, made me very sorry; but I assure you, my lord, that I thought you had been in the boat. . . ." She concludes, "And thus, good sweet heart, I bid you most heartily farewell, praying to Almighty God to send me good speed in my suit, that I may have a short end and return to you shortly again, for I shall think every hour x till I be with you again." (Note that at this time Honor was 43 and Arthur 76 or 58, depending on which birth date one

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chooses; they had been married nine years.) Arthur's first letter begins, "My very heart root, and entirely beloved Bedfellow, in my right hearty manner I recommend me unto you" and ends, "and thus fare you as heartily well to fare as ever gentlewoman did, and further I pray you to take it as well as ever woman did from her husband or lover. For my part I never loved none so well, neither thought so long for none since I knew a woman; as God knoweth, to whom I put all my trust to be your aid and mine." He begins one letter, "Gentle bedfellow and my very heart root" and another, "Mine own sweetheart, In the most heartiest manner that I can I commend me unto you, desiring nothing in the world more than your coming home." Again, he tells her to "send me no money till you come home yourself, for whom I do as much long for as doth the child for his nurse, and that knoweth God." She concludes another, "And thus, mine own good Lord, I can no more, but bid you farewell, even as heartily as the poor heart may, which is oftener with you than with the body, though it be here: which God best knoweth, who send you your most heart's desire, and us both shortly a merry meeting, which is the thing that I most in this world desire. . . . By her that is more yours than her own."

Miss Byrne's second category for the value of the Letters is that of social history. In this they are without peer: no other collection approaches them in wealth of detail about the minutiae of daily life in public and private, about food, ailments, medicines, education, relations between classes and sexes, furniture, costume, and so on. The two reasons for this are first, that while the Lisles were living in Calais during these seven years most of their business was transacted in England: their lands and rents were there, their supplies had to be ordered from there, their friends, older children, and patrons were there; and the letters contain a complete record of all these matters. Calais, which had been English for almost 200 years, was a microcosm of English life, and totally dependent on the homeland. The second reason is that all Lisle's papers in Calais were seized, suddenly and without warning, when he was arrested on suspicion of treason in May, 1540; as supplemented by such documents as the inventory of his household goods, they provide a cross-section of life in both Calais and England cut, as it were, from the living tree.

With the help of Miss Byrne's highly informative footnotes and her truly remarkable index (which brings together for the reader's convenience all the references on almost any subject imaginable, from Childhood, Clergy, and Costume through Diseases, Medicines, Marriage, Money, and Social Customs to Weapons, Women, and Zwingli), the reader begins to feel that he really understands what people were concerned about in the England of Shakespeare's grandparents, how life was and how their minds worked. As Miss Byrne often repeats, the theme of the past is always double: how

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much those people were like us and how different they were; neither generalization will do alone.

The Letters show ordinary people trying to get along and, usually, get ahead in the England of Henry VIII. They are concerned first to do their work well and please their parents or superiors, and secondly to acquire money, power, or security, or to maneuver themselves into a position to which these benefits eventually will accrue. Better than any other source, the Letters reveal just how the intricate web of debts, favors, obligations, influences, and the like really worked. Everyone was in debt, inflation was rampant, and the buying and selling of places was a main preoccupation. In Calais, to have a position as Spear of Honour in the Retinue was highly desirable, since it was a sinecure guaranteeing at least minimal economic security; and the buying and selling of rooms or their reversion went on busily. At a slightly higher level, the three main preoccupations of the nobility and gentry are described as land, litigation, and debts. But as the decade went on and Henry VIII became more suspicious and more bloodthirsty, most people became even more preoccupied with the retaining of their heads.

There is, of course, no end to the curious and entertaining examples that might be given from this realm of social history. Cramp rings were much sought after as remedies for any kind of cramp or convulsion and for the falling sickness. "From the time of Edward II the King's Good Friday offering was made into these rings, which were blessed at a special ceremony, prayers being said while the monarch rubbed them between his hands to impart to them the virtue of the consecrating oil used at his coronation." Walnut water was a cure for sore eyes, and a piece of unicorn's horn a valued gift. Lady Lisle had her own remedy for the stone, a powder for which Lord Edmund Howard thanks her thus: "Madame, so it is I have this night after midnight taken your medicine, for the which I heartily thank you, for it hath done me much good, and hath caused the stone to break, so that now I void much gravel. But for all that, your said medicine hath done me little honesty, for it made me piss my bed this night, for the which my wife hath sore beaten me, and saying it is children's parts to bepiss their bed. Ye have made me such a pisser that I dare not this day go abroad, wherefore I beseech you to make mine excuse to my Lord . . . , for that I shall not be with you this day at dinner. Madame, it is showed me that a wing or a leg of a stork, if I eat thereof, will make me that I shall never piss more in bed, and though my body be simple yet my tongue shall be ever good, and especially when it speaketh of women; and sithence such a medicine will do such a great cure God send me a piece thereof." A Doctor Le Coop diagnoses Lady Lisle as being of a cold complexion, having "diverse cold and slemysh humours within your body"; he prescribes a diet to reduce this "abundance of humours." The education of James Basset, Honor's son by

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her first marriage, may be followed in detail. At the age of ten he is sent to the College of Navarre where he experiences the kind of old-fashioned education complained of by Erasmus, Montaigne, and Ramus. He complains of the food, among many other things; he has a particularly low tolerance for the salt-fish diet common in Lent. After a year at Navarre he is given a prebend (at 11, he is thought too young for cure of souls) and takes the two minor orders of "Benet" and "Colet" (i.e., exorcist and acolyte) to qualify. He does not, however, proceed in the Church, but is taken into the service of Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester. The institution of service is well explained by Miss Byrne, who says, "The Tudor social system was still basically feudal, hierarchical, and patriarchal and therefore personal and individual, and the idea of 'service' was central to it. Service was at once education for life and a way of life. The system says to the boy or girl, Serve your apprenticeship to the state of life to which you have been born, learn well to the end you may do better service to your prince, your country, the commonwealth, and help your parents, yourself, and all yours. . . . Service is the social contract, inherited by the sixteenth century from medieval thought, which gives security to the individual by recognizing the concept of order that places all men as equals or superiors or inferiors. It gives every man his place in the scheme of things." Miss Byrne remarks that she does not know "any other collection which throws as much light upon and illustrates so compendiously this institution of service," and certainly the account given in the letters of the educating and establishing of the Basset and Plantagenet children, as illuminated by the editor's notes and commentary, is wonderfully comprehensive.

The third kind of value claimed by Miss Byrne for the Letters is the political and historical, and this she locates chiefly in the evidence they provide for reinterpreting the relation between the arrest of Lisle and the downfall of Thomas Cromwell. Lisle was recalled in May 1540, accused of being implicated in the Botolf conspiracy; after two years in the Tower, he was completely exonerated, but died before he could be released. The end of his story, Miss Byrne says, is not a medieval drama of blind fate, but an issue of character and circumstances, "a story of the way trivial causes and ordinary people contribute to tragic results and are overwhelmed in them when they are caught up into the struggle for power between ruthless and unscrupulous enemies." Botolf, one of Lisle's domestic chaplains, was a fast-talking rascal known in Calais as "Gregory Sweet-lips." A born spy and a secret papist, he slipped across the frontier into France in February 1540 to make his way to Rome, where he offered to betray Calais. Because Clement Philpot, Lisle's son-in-law, left Calais with him (though not for the same destination), Lisle was accused of complicity. Miss Byrne argues plausibly that the charge was instigated by Cromwell as part of his ma-

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neuvering to retain power—that it was essentially a frame-up. Cromwell's religious policy in Calais was soft on heresy and sedition and sympathetic to the Reformers; this made it difficult for Lisle and the Calais Council to govern, and all this helped to bring about Cromwell's downfall, since Henry VIII was moving back to a more conservative and Roman Catholic position (except for papal supremacy) during this period.

Miss Byrne makes a good case for her thesis, arguing that the reason it has not been understood before is that Lisle has been considered a nonentity or worse, in the "Merriman myth of the maladministration of the inefficient old muddler." Throughout the Letters, she has shown that he was not ineffectual as administrator or neglectful of his duties, and she notes that he was finally not pardoned but exonerated: Henry VIII's acknowledgment that Lisle was "void of all offence" was "the nearest thing to an apology that Henry VIII ever made in his life." Lisle's reputation, she insists, "emerges unscathed, after seven years of wrestling with the insoluble problems of Calais during the most difficult years of Henry's reign. . . ."

I suspect, however, that most readers, like this one, will care less about the rehabilitation of Arthur Lisle than about the many vivid glimpses of great events and personages as related by ordinary people preoccupied with their own concerns. "News here are none, but that the abbeys shall down," writes a correspondent to Lady Lisle in 1536, "as one of the most far-reaching changes in European history . . . is decided upon," comments Miss Byrne. A reformist preacher with the wonderful name of Adam Damplip holds forth in Calais, as do Sacramentarians and others; meanwhile, the stake and the headsman's block are busy in London. Elsewhere in England there are the Nun of Kent and the Pilgrimage of Grace. In Ireland, there is the rebellion of Silken Thomas and the Geraldines. Anne Boleyn is tried and executed; Anne of Cleves visits Calais. And at the center of all is Henry VIII, for whom Miss Byrne has scant sympathy: "Those cold, cunning eyes, caught by all his best portraits, tell the truth about the implacable will to power, the hard, realistic appraisal of a man or a situation, and the unscrupulous egotism of a cruel and overbearing nature which distinguished him from first to last."

Books are not life but then what is? as Marvin Mudrick so memorably inquired. The relevant question for us is, however, the opposite one: no one can doubt that the Lisle Letters are life, but in what sense are they a book—that is, a work of art? In the first place, they are shaped and given form by certain historical accidents. Because they consist only of the papers seized in Calais in 1540, they begin with the Lisles' taking up residence there in 1533 and end with Arthur's final departure for England. Since Lisle was innocent of any conspiracy, there is no plot of that sort to reveal; but as Henry be-

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comes more suspicious and treacherous and Cromwell builds his power the problems of governing in Calais become more difficult and Lisle's position becomes more precarious. There is, then, a kind of generalized suspense; everything moves toward crisis. As in a play or novel, after we have become well acquainted with the two chief characters, we see them in love and participate vicariously in their experience. Husee, as he brings the Lisles up to date and explains how the system works, functions like a narrator or commentator. A second historical accident that contributes to this effect is the simple fact that Calais was in the most literal sense a microcosm, a little world consisting (with the Pale) of only 120 square miles, an enclave on French soil but English for almost 200 years, and wholly dependent on England. Since Calais was thus English and foreign at once, and since the Lisles' roots and interests and family concerns remained across the channel in England, the texture of everyday life, domestic and official, appears in the Letters in lifelike—or art-like—detail. This makes them seem from time to time more like an epistolary novel than like a random collection of letters.

Far more important than these historical accidents, however, is the presence of the editor: if the past is recaptured and the dead bones made to live, it is because Miss Byrne makes the miracle happen. She is always there, but never intrusive; she supplies every fact anyone could possibly want for context or background, but she doesn't confine herself to an "objective" or self-effacing role. Instead, she takes responsibility for the whole show, and it comes alive for the reader because it has come alive first in her imagination. One is tempted to compare her to the Showman of Vanity Fair; but her central characters are neither fools, cynics, nor schemers, but decent people who are trying to behave responsibly, and neither she nor they have the least touch of Thackeray's easy sentimentality. She keeps firmly in mind her precept that the lesson the past teaches is always double: how much things and people change, and how little they change. Her commentary never neglects one side of this precept to emphasize the other. A work of scholarship this thorough, laborious, and painstaking is seldom also imaginative; but this one is. To see anything done this well, combining diverse and sometimes incompatible excellences, gives one a special satisfaction and a renewed faith in the powers of the human mind.

Miss Byrne is, of course, quite conscious of what she is doing when she sees the Letters as like a play or novel; her commentary, she states explicitly, is intended to transform them into something more than life: "And because the Lisle correspondence, though not art, is, in fact, more than a slice of life, is indeed a statement about life, about the human predicament, the fullness of the statement and our perception of the over-all pattern remain incomplete . . . unless one adds prologue and epilogue when the story begins and ends. . . . " Only in one place does she trespass across the boundary

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and write about her characters as a historical novelist might. This is when she describes Arthur in prison at the end of his life; she presents him looking back over that long life in almost stream-of-consciousness fashion: "Seven years in Calais; nearly two in prison. In those nine years death had taken a heavy toll of friends, family, acquaintances. . . . wise old Fox of Winchester and the great Cardinal; Kite of Carlisle had played his last game of penny-gleek with Kingston; and old Sherburn of Chichester had gone—ninety-six years, they said, but did anyone really know how old he was? Come to that, he had never been too sure of his own age, not to a year or so . . . nobody seemed quite sure . . . well, that could be the way of it with a bastard, even a King's bastard—perhaps he was already eighty. He had seen so many of the young ones die before him—Richmond . . . and that other Arthur, Arthur Prince of Wales, dead forty years ago, while he himself still lived on." It is amusing that Miss Byrne makes him unsure of his own age, thus dramatizing the much-vexed question! But this one lapse is more than understandable and forgivable; it is endearing.

I undertook this review partly because it seemed to promise a kind of escape: these Letters, I hoped, would take me away from literary criticism and from the modern world. They did in fact serve this function admirably for several months. But it is no mere pious platitude to say that all such absolute distinctions break down. The Letters would not stay put in neat compartments. Past and present interpenetrate, as do life and art; each draws strength from the other. The way out becomes the way back, flight becomes return; longest way round becomes shortest way home. The Letters provide not only escape but discovery, new awareness not only of the past but of the present. What they do, Miss Byrne says finally, is confer life: when they stop, the writers "remain personages, become ancestors; but for those seven years they were humanity itself, clinging to its moment of time."

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GUY DAVENPORT

# In That Awful Civil War

The Johnson Boys were boys of honor,
They knew how to court the maids,
They knew how to hug and kiss!
Hop up, pretty girls, don't be afraid!
Hop up, pretty girls, don't be afraid!

They were lads of skill and courage,
And their side was very far,
And they joined the country's service
In that awful Civil War.
Hop up, pretty girls, don't be afraid!
—"The Johnson Boys"

*Abbvill District South Carolina*, runs a family document I have before me, *I Wm. Wair of Abbvill District received of J. J. Mattison Nine Hundred Dollars it in full being for a Negro boy named Brister about 18 years old for which I warnt to be sound in boddy and mind, and free from the clames of any person or person's whatsoever in witness whear of I set my hand and seal December 17th. 1855 Wm. Wair, Test by Daniel Mattison.* This J. J. Mattison was my great-grandfather. This past May, a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters scribbled a note and passed it over to me while that distinguished organization was dispensing its annual bounty of prizes and medals. The sender, hearing that I was born in Anderson, South Carolina, informed me, as a point of interest, that his family had once resided in Abbeville, just down the road. So whatever the fate of the slave Brister whose body my family had bought for $900, he most certainly would have known the great-grandparents of the man who slipped me the note, who was Ralph Ellison.

The reverberations of the Civil War will chime through our lives for a long time yet. We are still very much in its aftermath. Except for Vietnam (against the horrors of which we have achieved a self-induced amnesia), all our wars are over, dismissed from our concern, all but the hideous war that raged along the Mississippi and in the Virginia hills for four terrible years. If, at a public ceremony, my birthplace were given as Picardy, Burma, Anzio, or San Juan, who would scribble a note to say that his grandparents once lived nearby, and pass it over?

If the past is prologue, it is also a record of grievances to call up

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and enlist as excuses. All you need is rhetorical talent and a gift for rationalizing. History is also a wardrobe of costumes. The Confederacy, as Mary Chesnut demonstrates on every page of her Civil War diary, was born dressing up in a gaudily eclectic array of costumes.[1] Mark Twain blamed the Civil War on Sir Walter Scott. We see the truth of his whimsy. Beauregard was a marshal of Napoleon, soldiers were *chevaliers* from the Middle Ages, statesmen were Greek and Roman orators (who had of course owned slaves), the Confederacy was the Scots Highlands with its fearless and patriotic clans. Every Adonis of a lieutenant was Lord Byron at Missolonghi. Mary Boykin Chesnut's diary begins with Secession, and she rapidly turns from the roomfuls of senators and judges and hysterical women which she describes so well to the Scottish poet Campbell:

> Their bosoms they bared to the glorious strife
> And their oaths were recorded on high
> To prevail in the cause that was dearer than life
> Or crushed in its ruins to die.

She keeps this interplay between reality and myth for some 700 pages: ". . . at supper at the Haynes', Wigfall was sent for to address a crowd before the Mills House piazza. Like Fitz James—when he visits Clan Alpine again—it is to be in the saddle, &c&c. So let Washington beware." As a refined lady she did not actually hear Senator Wigfall's speech to the vulgar crowd in which he announced the inevitability of war with the North and promised to return to the Washington he had left in the saddle, with naked sabre, triumphant. Such things were conveyed to her over "pâté de foie gras, salad, biscuit glacé, and champaigne frappé," a supper which she found "a consolation." This supper, as we must supply with our imagination, was prepared and served by slaves who kept their own counsel.

During the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Mary Chesnut notes that the slaves were uncommonly silent as they went about their work, giving no sign that they heard the cannon, or that they were aware of their significance.

Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823–1886), the wife of a South Carolina plantation owner, politician, and founder of the Confederacy, was as fine a specimen of her type as you can come up with. The Boykins were in Virginia in the seventeenth Century, and in South Carolina before the Revolution. They were all Somebody. She was educated at a French girl's school in Charleston, visited the frontier in Mississippi as a girl (a bad experience that caused her to begin to doubt the morality of slavery, of which she was outspokenly criti-

[1] MARY CHESNUT'S CIVIL WAR, ed. by *C. Vann Woodward.* Yale University Press. $29.95.

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cal—but we must remember that bookish, cultivated women were made allowances for, and not taken seriously). She married well. She knew everybody. Her information about what was happening in the world came from senators, generals, Mrs. Jeff Davis. She prodded her husband into greater ambition; he was "too High South Carolina" for his own good. She was childless. She had considerable literary talent, wrote unpublishable novels, and eventually satisfied her longing to write something readable and memorable by spending the end of her days working up her sketchy Civil War diary into the skilfully wrought artefact that has come down to us, and which Prof. C. Vann Woodward has edited definitively with great care and painstaking scholarship.

The diary has a history of its own. It was first published in 1905, edited by Isabella Martin and Myrta Lockett Avary, as *A Diary from Dixie*. The editors took liberties with the text (suppressing, for example, a murder in the family). This edition, with more liberties taken, was re-issued by the novelist Ben Ames Williams in 1949. Both these texts, as Prof. Woodward points out, are made to adhere to received notions of the myth of the Old South, for which, I suppose, Margaret Mitchell must be recognized as the official mythmaker.

It was Ben Ames Williams' romanticized text that Edmund Wilson made on over in *Patriotic Gore*, praising it for its uncanny awareness of historical moment and for its novelistic qualities. Both Williams and Wilson were unaware that they were talking about a conscious work of art written twenty years after the time it purported to record day by day. Enough of the original sketch diary remains for us to see how well Mrs. Chesnut forged the 1880 version. Severe critics have called the text as we now have it a fraud, but I know of no law against working up one's diary for publication.

I began reading this diary ill disposed to put up with it. For one thing, the voice. It is the voice of all the insufferable prigs in the South then and now. It is the voice, with its muscovados triphthongs and Master Race *hauteur* that I heard quite enough of in a South Carolina upbringing ("But you *hayev* dadmit a nigra baby is jess the cutest lil ole *thang*") and which can no longer free itself from instant caricature: "Fote Sumtah'z bin fod upon mah rejmunt leaves t'morra." We are no sooner into the diary than Mrs. Chesnut tells us she suffers from not being able to enter a room without all the gallant gentlemen (her word, not mine) falling in love with her. She discusses the gallantry (her word) of duelling with the coolness of a Regency Corinthian. Her society took it for granted that one Christian gentleman would cut another to death with a Bowie knife, while himself being cut to death with a Bowie knife, if one of them had cast an aspersion on one of their female kin, or on their manner of dealing cards, or on the genetic components of their ancestry.

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One gets used to her voice, however, for it is one of variety and intelligence. She is aware of the narrowness of her times, she thinks ("Who is more a slave than a wife?"), she is sympathetic, critical, wonderfully observant. If she is comically a woman of her period, trained in pettiness, gossip, whining, and all the wiles and fripperies for which Confederate women are famous, that is not her fault. If these emblems of type were not hers, she would have been the wrong woman to write the dramatic, richly detailed narrative she has left us. It is a book you can open anywhere for a good hour's reading. You will find more characters than in Tolstoy, good dialogue, good waspy gossip—the Civil War day by day as it was known to people in crinoline and alpaca in Victorian rooms, French novels on rosewood tables. "Oranges are five dollars apiece." It is remarked upon that Stonewall Jackson is "a blue-light Calvinist" and thus does not have the comfort of being able to cuss like a man. Young men in yellow gloves and with names like Barnwell Rhett, Jr. and St. Julien Ravenel kneel and kiss one's hand before riding off to be slain in a glory of bugles at Chickamauga.

To read Mary Chesnut, as I did, in the same month as William McFeely's *Grant*[2] is not only to see the Civil War from the opposite side, but also on the battlefields as distinct from the Southern parlor, and from a masculine and Stoic point of view rather than a feminine and emotional one.

Prof. McFeely has written a traditional biography of Grant that is also an historical essay about nineteenth-century American men (in transition between the frontier experience and the world of the technocrat and financial manager they had nothing significant to do), war, and the presidency. He traces the young Grant's all but aimless drift from rural Ohio to West Point (one way to get out of a small town and a lifetime of tanning leather alongside his father). Timidly he allowed his congressman's mistake for his name, Ulysses Simpson Grant, to replace the Hiram Ulysses Grant of the birth register. It is a surprise to learn that he was interested in literature and painting in oils, at which he was good.

He has come down to us in the popular imagination as a dullard who drank and a president who may or may not have noticed corruption in his cabinet. He is our Honest Soldier, taciturn, blunt, and humorless. Yet his *Memoirs*, written at the very end of his life (Mark Twain urging him on), have been admired (Gertrude Stein being among the admirers) for their Roman clarity. Indeed, Grant can easily be seen as a figure in Plutarch. He was never out of character. Even his foibles and tragic weaknesses were thoroughly consistent with the way he thought. His moment to be truly great came in the Reconstruction, when he could have sent in the army to help Adelbert Ames, the carpetbagger governor of Mississippi and one

[2] GRANT: A Biography, by *William S. McFeely*. Norton. $19.95.

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of the most goodhearted, well-meaning Liberals in American history. Ames was, in his idealistic way, within sight of establishing equal rights for freed slaves and of introducing democracy to a feudal society. The Ku Klux Klan and other murderous bullies blocked his way. He appealed to Grant, whose opinion it was that the South had seen all it could stand of the U.S. Army. Grant's own scheme was to settle American blacks in Santo Domingo, which would be a state all their own. No one in the government, or in Santo Domingo, could ever see what Grant expected to come of this plan, which had only an elementary simplicity to recommend it.

Grant began his career with a series of failures as a businessman. The Mexican War showed him his destiny. When the Civil War began, he blundered up the ranks battle after bloody battle. His idea of war was that you killed the enemy. When you had killed all of the enemy, the war would be over. McFeely's descriptions of battle are horrifying and unremittingly realistic. He stylizes nothing, romanticizes nothing. In all of Douglas Southall Freeman's *Lee's Lieutenants* you get nothing like the description McFeely gives of the cowards huddled along the banks of the river at Shiloh, or of the pig-sticking cruelty of the Confederate attack before dawn, when the northern regiments were naked in their bedrolls. (In two days at Shiloh more men died than in the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War altogether.)

The Civil War was, as Sherman said in Ohio the year that Mrs. Chesnut began to rewrite her diary, "all hell." And Grant pushed through it doggedly, drunk, sending his laconic telegrams, sparing nothing. He was apparently without ideals (he owned five slaves when the war began), without a shred of romance or religion (he was baptized a few days before he died). He was simply a soldier; to win a war you kill the enemy. Some of his battles were the worst planned and most cruelly executed in military history.

He was an indifferent president, missing greatness chance after chance. In one sense he freed the slaves and slovenly allowed them to be enslaved again to bigotry, poverty, and prejudice. (But then Eisenhower, as President of Columbia University, did not think it appropriate that there should be a black guest at a banquet over which he was to preside.) His presidency was scandal all the way through. Then he went round the world, God knows why. He rarely made a speech over five sentences long. At the opera he was apt to rise in the middle of the overture, and say, "Well, we've heard about enough of this, haven't we?" To visit Bismarck in Berlin, he walked over to the palace and knocked on the door, the way he called on his cabinet members when he was President. He was, in his ornamentless blue uniform, his scuffed boots, and the cavalry hat so hopelessly inelegant in the Brady photographs, destiny itself.

The first value of history is that we can see the war at Mary Chesnut's side, and at Grant's, and know the man (as she could not) who

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took Lee's sword at Appomattox. History must be human before it can give up any meaning at all. McFeely is a biographer of great compassion. Anyone who really wants to know the history of the American black's misery should read his account of the first black cadet at West Point, during Grant's administration. He was heckled and hazed pitilessly, and one of his chief tormentors was Grant's son. The black, James Webster Smith, of South Carolina, survived his persecution, only to be flunked by a philosophy professor.

No one imagines, a century and a half later, that any of this is over. This summer also saw the publication of one of the sharp-eyed overviews of slavery ten years before the war, Frederick Law Olmsted's newspaper reports of a long trip through the Southern states—ostensibly a study of agriculture and the economic effectiveness of slave labor, but in reality a sensitive sociological assessment of plantation and city culture.[3] Olmsted, later a parks designer and conservationist, was at this time a newspaperman close to Parke Godwin, Edward Everett Hale, and other Liberals. His account of the Old South triangulates with Mrs. Chesnut's and McFeely's to show us the actual structure and feel of slavery. The system was, as even the plantationers were quick to admit, ridiculously inefficient. Olmsted kept running into pleasant, bumblebrained slave-holders who complained that the slaves were driving them crazy with their shiftlessness, overbreeding, and irresponsibility. They opined that they would be grateful if the North would free them.

But by that time the South was caught in a trap of its own making. Even if, like Jefferson, they were willing to free the slaves, what would these childlike creatures do? (This argument conceals the terrible fear of the slaves' retribution, and of their being a permanent reminder of the inhumanity that enslaved them.) A battery of arguments were always trundled out for Olmsted: Northern wage-earners in New England were worse fed and housed than the slaves, and English slum-dwellers were infinitely worse off. The slaves were better off than in Africa, where they had been enslaved by their own people. And so on.

Olmsted's South is a South Mrs. Chesnut probably was aware of but without Olmsted's perspective. It was shoddy, run-down, everything in ill repair. The neoclassical mansions were beautiful, but ringed with slave-cabins (close enough to keep an eye on—I hadn't suspected this) they lost a great deal of their charm. Most slave-owners complained of being pestered out of their minds by slaves who, forbidden initiative and treated like idiots, always liked to ask if something were all right before doing it.

What Olmsted shows us is a culture in the raw, capable of a high

[3] THE PAPERS OF FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED, VOLUME II: Slavery and the South, 1852–1857, ed. by *Charles E. Beveridge, Charles Capen McLaughlin,* and *David Schuyler.* Johns Hopkins University Press. $27.50.

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civilization in Charleston drawing rooms and in a few private homes, but for the most not working, clumsy, perhaps purposeless to those who took stock of what they thought they were doing. In their most idealistic picture of themselves, Southerners looked back to Greece and Rome (a decade or so after the century of the Enlightenment!) for a model, but many of them must have seen that they were awkwardly out of phase, that they were maintaining a feudal society in the dawn of the Age of Steam. Slavery gave them the opportunity to be idle, demoralized, and vain. The beautiful irony is that it was a man bored with being idle, for whom the war was something to do, who fought them to the death over an ideal which perhaps both North and South, each in its own way, had betrayed.

Whether the War accomplished anything that political evolution would have achieved in time is a question with many answers. It was so complex a war that it can be said to have begun before the Republic itself, and to be still going on.

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## *Notes on Contributors*

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PATRICIA MEYER SPACKS, Professor of English at Yale, is writing a book on gossip. Her most recent work is *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination.*

The long poem in this issue will be included in LAURENCE LIEBERMAN's next collection, *Eros at the World Kite Pageant*, to be published by Macmillan in the winter of 1983. His most recent book was *God's Measurements*, also from Macmillan.

JOSEPH EPSTEIN is editor of *The American Scholar.* His most recent book is *Ambition: The Secret Passion*, published in 1981 by E. P. Dutton.

WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS'* book, *One Way to Reconstruct the Scene*, won the Yale Series of Younger Poets' prize and was published by Yale University Press in 1980. A native of Ohio, Mr. Davis now lives in Texas, where he is Professor of English and Writer-in-Residence at Baylor University.

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*(Continued on page 176)*

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MARVIN MUDRICK

# The Muslims Are Coming! The Muslims Are Coming!

V. S. NAIPAUL (WHO *comes from* there and even *looks like* them) has been saying it for a quarter of a century now, it's what you always knew about the Third World but didn't dare tell anybody except your favorite bartender: East is East but West is Best. Till now, in default of a larger audience, Naipaul has been saying it to the readers of highbrow writing, those fit but few who hold their annual convention in the nearest telephone booth. Yet ripeness is all. Now, having made the timeliest possible in-depth and low-profile tour of the latest Third-World powder-kegs and tinderboxes and sleeping giants, he returns brimming with the latest evidence for his same old news behind the news; only, now at last he gets to say it in thunder for Dick Cavett and the Book-of-the-Month Club: Damn the wogs: Kipling was right all the time.[1] Naipaul complains that the weekly newsmagazines encourage Islamic barbarism (the noisiest barbarism of the moment) by their toothless and respectful coverage of it, that they "[were] helping to make the history they recorded. Islam was pure and perfect; the secular, dying West was to be rejected; that was the message." The Muslims are coming! But he needn't fret, history or publicity has to have a fresh face every week, timeliness is all, each subject cancels out the past and the future: hobby computers and Bo Derek two weeks apart with the glowering Ayatollah sandwiched in between; and unless the world ends before the Sunday afternoon deadline and requires an emergency paste-job cover story it'll be Naipaul next, and Western chauvinism will be chic at least one more time. (And lo! on the cover of *Newsweek*—November 16, 1981—there he was in so to speak full color.)

Naipaul isn't an opportunist, though the opportunity having come he takes it with a vengeance because it's vengeance that he has in mind: against the lesser breeds, against his own past, his life as a third-generation East Indian in the black-and-brown West Indies, where—trying to emulate (to ape) the lordly Europeans who have already quit and gone back to civilization—the blacks and East Indians seem to him sick jokes, seem in his raging phrase "like monkeys pleading for evolution" (in *The Middle Passage*, published twenty years ago, which is his horrified account of his visit home from grateful permanent exile in England; and he doesn't feel a bit bet-

[1]AMONG THE BELIEVERS, by *V. S. Naipaul*. Knopf. $15.00.

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ter twenty years after). The catchword in *Among the Believers* is "rage." According to Naipaul the dynamo that charges up these believers isn't so much belief as rage; and Naipaul is their brother and, more than he knows, their advocate, because though he himself isn't a believer—quite the contrary—he too is charged up with rage: that they should *presume!* and furthermore he takes their rage far more seriously than any Westerner except a *Time* or *Newsweek* reporter would: "He spoke in Persian or Urdu to one of the students, and the student went off and came back with a magazine. It was *The Message of Peace,* Volume One, Number One. So this was where they churned it out, the rage about the devils of the Western democracies, the hagiographies of the Shia Imams. This was where they read Schumacher and Toynbee and used their words—about technology and ecology—to lash the West." "Islam sanctified rage—rage about the faith, political rage: one could be like the other." "And rage was what I saw—more clearly in this rich, reconstructed town than in Tehran—when we returned to Mashhad: the burnt-out buildings (among them the Broadway cinema, with its English lettering and Las Vegas façade), the ruined, burnt pedestals in the gardens without their royal statues, all the Persepolitan, pre-Islamic motifs of the Shah's architecture mocked. The holy city was also a city of rage." "Their rage [in Malaysia now]—the rage of pastoral people with limited skills, limited money, and a limited grasp of the world—is comprehensive. Now they have a weapon: Islam. It is their way of getting even with the world. It serves their grief, their feeling of inadequacy, their social rage and racial hate." (Whenever Naipaul goes on too long about "rage" and such, he starts slinging words around for effect rather than for meaning. "Weapon" sounds ominous, but is Islam a "weapon" anywhere at all outside the hallucinations of its faithful?) "But already what had been won was being undermined by the grief and rage of the people not represented there, the people of river and forest who had stood outside the awakening of colonial days, and whose sons now made the first generation of educated village Malays." "Jakarta [in Indonesia, as you wouldn't have to be told if you kept up with the newsweeklies] boomed. The city and the country needed wealth and skills. But these things created wounding divisions, and there was rage about the loss of the old order, the loss of the old knowledge of good and bad." "After a generation of peace, the revolutionary current . . . flowed again. It was Islamic now, but it was like what had gone before: as though rage and the wish for revenge were always to be tapped in this overcrowded, once-feudal land, where many men were squeezed out, the old balance was broken, where every step forward took men further away from safety, where the new world brought new gifts but made difficult demands, and all men, whether at the top or at the bottom, lived in fear of personality loss." Because (rage leads to personality loss, which in turn leads to plati-

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tudes) a step forward is a step back, and a gift is a burden, and even a nonentity fears the loss of identity, and without roots a plant won't throw off shoots: "After the dizzying history of the last fifty years, the world had grown strange, and people floated. Whether they moved forward, into the new civilization, or backward, like Suryadi's daughter, towards the purer Arab faith, they were now always entering somebody else's world, and getting further from themselves." Or: "He hadn't been able to define himself because he didn't know who he was. He had been cut off from his past. He had gone to the Dutch school when he was six; he had been cleansed of village beliefs. For a writer, his early life had been oddly wordless: he had never had a conversation with his parents. That was why the Canadian anthropologist had been of such use to him." (This anthropologist is quite a dish, by the way: "a big and lovely young woman in a safari suit. . . . By her skilled questioning she had reconstructed his ancestral past for him. He couldn't have done it himself." Because it takes two to tango.)

For somebody as usually desperate as Naipaul is about everything he comes from and broods over, bitching and moaning, wringing his hands, in as theatrical a fix as the people he writes about with their "frenzies and frustrations," he's most of the time a surprisingly expert, resilient, expansive writer (and very well read in "litritcher and poultry," as they are called by the down-home caricatures in his most nearly genial book of fiction, *Miguel Street*). If only he weren't so single-mindedly committed to his conclusions, so incapable of thinking about them, so exasperated and revived by all the irrefutable evidence he compulsively collects. A believer he's been interviewing asks him, "what is the purpose of your writing? Is it to tell people what it's all about?" and Naipaul answers, "Yes. I would say comprehension"—a sound answer, but one that doesn't predict or justify the current of foregone conclusions that oppressively steers the reader through Naipaul's books. In fact Naipaul already *knows* "what it's all about"—You see? you see? it's as bad as I told you!—and he doesn't try to comprehend, he doesn't reflect on his material, he's content to react to it with rage and shame. His most admired book—it has been compared, but not by me, to Dickens—is *A House for Mr Biswas*, his novel about an East Indian family in Trinidad: while reading it the reader never doubts the locale, the circumstances, the people; but if there's a more relentlessly depressing novel around I haven't read it. (Naipaul, still unreconciled to those unevolved simians his compatriots, plays a sour little joke on the Western reader: the principal setting of the novel is "Hanuman House"; and "Hanuman," as Naipaul never says, is the name of the Hindu monkey-god.) Indeed it's so uniformly depressing that Naipaul himself can't believe it is, but later in the novel keeps imagining he has sweetened the earlier part with happy scenes and amiable characters and relationships that just aren't there. For instance

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when on page 375 Hari dies, the narrator confidently sums him up: "He was one of those men who, by a negativeness that amounts to charity, are thought of kindly by everyone. He had taken part in no disputes; his goodness, like his scholarship, was a family tradition. Everyone had been used to seeing Hari as the officiating pundit at religious ceremonies; everyone had been used to receiving the consecrated food from him every morning. Hari, in dhoti, his forehead marked with sandalwood paste; Hari doing morning and evening *puja*; Hari with his religious texts on the elaborately carved bookrest: these had been fixed sights in the Tulsi house"; and the reader wonders whether he has remembered correctly (already disconcerting, since such a summary implies a well established character who will be missed for these so obvious as hardly having to be specified reasons) and leafs back to page 103: "There was Hari, a tall, pale, quiet man who spent much time at the long table, working through mounds of rice in a slow, unenthusiastic but efficient way, watched over by his pregnant wife. He spent even more time in the latrine, and this made him feared [because some day when I have to go he'll be immovably settled there?]"; "Between his estate duties, his reading in the verandah and his visits to the latrine, Hari had little free time, and was open to approach only at the long table. But then conversation was not easy. Hari believed in chewing every mouthful forty times, and was a noisy and preoccupied eater." Hari makes his only other front-and-center appearance to preside over the Hindu "house-blessing" of Mr Biswas' shop, a ceremony the ruinous cost of which guarantees the failure of the business: "He greeted Mr Biswas without rancour, without pleasure, without interest. Then he went into the bedroom that was reserved for him and changed into his pundit's garb, which he had brought in a small cardboard suitcase." Despite page 375, then, Hari is *not* "thought of kindly" by at any rate Mr Biswas. Or: "Savi [Mr Biswas' daughter] took these defeats badly. . . . Not wishing to hurt herself again or to hurt her father, she could not tell him what had happened; and he was the only person who could have comforted her"; but up to this instant on page 414 there isn't a trace of evidence that Savi cares one way or the other about her feckless, unaffectionate, and mostly absent father. Or: "When Mr Biswas broke the news of the exhibition, Shama [his wife] set about defending the widows, and she and Mr Biswas had a long and friendly squabble about the Tulsi family. It was like old times . . ."; but, as Naipaul seems to have forgotten, all the old times between them were uniformly bleak (and without a hint of sexual desire or activity: this must be the unsexiest novel since *Wuthering Heights*). There are also occasional plangent moments when Mr Biswas sets aside his characteristic thick-headed panicky helplessness (like a monkey pleading for evolution) and flaunts a miraculously fictional sensibility ("Then he thought, 'I have missed their childhoods' ") that seems to have drifted in from

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somebody else's novels; Dickens' or Barbara Cartland's probably. The trouble is that Naipaul has a taste for horrors only, minor or major, the grandest of which is the slow-motion destruction of the Shorthills estate by the family as by a pillaging army on holiday; and finally the book isn't—though in excerpts it may seem so—funny because horrible beyond verisimilitude or acceptability, it's just horrible as a betrayal of family secrets, a proxy confession of impotence, a protracted cry of rage and shame against the lesser breeds who can't build a house or cultivate a field or develop or even convincingly adopt or imitate a civilization.

Naipaul made two visits to the land of his forefathers, one in the early 'sixties, one in the late 'seventies, and published a book about each; and if you've been paying attention you won't have any problem figuring out how he responded (though the evidence, whenever he can bear to present it, is always more shocking than his familiar responses to it), as in these extracts from his first book on India, *An Area of Darkness*: "my hysteria"; "Compassion and pity did not answer; they were refinements of hope. Fear was what I felt. Contempt was what I had to fight against"; "total Indian negation"; "Perhaps in the end it was fatigue that overcame me. For abruptly, in the midst of hysteria, there occurred periods of calm, in which I found that I had grown to separate myself from what I saw" (but these "periods of calm" disintegrate very quickly); "India's ever receding degrees of degradation" (regarding the caste system, which besides is imprinted on every lay occupation, so that a clerk in an office in which you are waiting for some paper-shuffling to get finished "will not bring you a glass of water even if you faint" because that function belongs to the job of some inferior creature who doesn't happen to be on duty today); "the straight simple vision of the West" (in contrast to everything he is compelled to notice here); "It was a new bus station. Kashmiris, emerging from the gentlemen's lavatory, wiped their hands on the curtains, which were of a contemporary fabric. A well-dressed beggar woman distributed printed leaflets which told of her tragedy";

> In Madras the bus station near the High Court is one of the more popular latrines. The traveller arrives; to pass the time he raises his dhoti, defecates in the gutter. The bus arrives; he boards it; the woman sweeper cleans up after him. Still in Madras, observe this bespectacled patriarch walking past the University on the Marina. Without warning he raises his dhoti, revealing a backside bare save for what appears to be a ropelike G-string; he squats, pisses on the pavement, leisurely rises; the dhoti still raised, he rearranges his G-string, lets the dhoti fall, and continues on his promenade. It is a popular evening walk, this Marina; but no one looks, no face is averted in embarrassment.

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And it isn't just bus stations and universities: "Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets [Naipaul begins to sound like Churchill exhorting the British to resist the imminent Nazi invasion]; they never look for cover. . . . But the truth is that *Indians do not see these squatters* and might even, with complete sincerity, deny that they exist; a collective blindness arising out of the Indian fear of pollution and the resulting conviction that Indians are the cleanest people in the world." Because as they don't hesitate to inform us filthy Westerners Indians live by stringent sanitary rules, Hindu abracadabra, *religious* no less: "There is only one pure way to defecate; in love-making only the left hand is to be used; food is to be taken only with the right" ("the ladies at the Lucknow club, after denying that Indians defecate in public, will remind you, their faces creased with distaste, of the habits of Europe—the right hand used for love-making, toilet paper and food"):

> They were a brahmin family and their vegetarian food was served according to established form. No one was allowed to touch it except the dirty old servant who, at the mention of food, had been kindled into such important activity. With the very fingers that a moment before had been rolling a crinkled cigarette and had then seized the dusty Dalda tins from off the dusty bus floor, he now—using only the right hand, of course—distributed puris from one tin, scooped out curried potatoes from another, and from a third secured dripping fingerfuls of chutney. He was of the right caste; nothing served by the fingers of his right hand could be unclean; and the eaters ate with relish [as well as chutney].

(At Naipaul's hotel in Kuala Lumpur a bulletin-board memo in Malay and English discloses that " 'Irresponsible staffs have been urinating and purging' on the floor of the locker, and on canteen plates and in canteen glasses. Ritual cleanliness had nothing to do with cleanliness for its own sake, nothing to do with regard for the other man. . . . Muslims had to wash ritually five times a day before they offered their prayers; they used what was available; they used sinks and wash basins to wash their feet and genitals. . . ." But on this issue it's no soap for the Muslims, they're outclassed, in the matter of grunge the Hindus take the cake.)

For India-lovers who got a bang out of the preceding extracts from Naipaul's first book on India, here are a few not less cheery extracts from his second: "enough will never be done; and despair turns to weariness, and thoughts of action fade"; "squalor and defeat"; "retreat from civilization and creativity"; the "intellectual

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second-rateness . . . [of] the world's second most populous country"; "no idea of a contract between man and man"; "*Karma*, the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm"; "the stupor of meditation" (Naipaul hisses like a cobra whenever he mentions "middle-class Western hippies"); "a thousand years of defeat and stagnation" (nothing but bummers and downers, as the hippies would say); "Every open space was a latrine" (still and forever);

> The street-sweeper in Jaipur City uses his fingers alone to lift dust from the street into his cart (the dust blowing away in the process, returning to the street). The woman brushing the causeway of the great dam in Rajasthan before the top layer of concrete is put on uses a tiny strip of rag held between her thumb and middle finger. Veiled, squatting, almost motionless, but present, earning her half-rupee, her five cents, she does with her finger dabs in a day what a child can do with a single push of a long-handled broom. She is not expected to do more; she is hardly a person.

These are from *India: A Wounded Civilization* (but Naipaul must be kidding: "Not wounded, sir, but dead!" exclaims, falling on his face, the heroic cabin-boy in reply to the captain's anxious inquiry at the height of the sea-battle in a nineteenth-century British copybook poem).

Naipaul is so much of a one-idea writer (How do these barbarians have the *nerve* to set themselves up against the West?) that sooner or later the idea begins to seem too big for thinking about and too small for a book:

> How could he read, how could he judge, how could he venture into the critical disciplines of another civilization, when so much of his own history had been distorted for him, and declared closed to inquiry? [According to Islam, "history must serve theology."] And how strange, in the usurped Freemasons' Hall of Rawalpindi, to talk of the English political novel and the distortions of colonialism, when in that city in a few weeks, in the name of an Islam that was not to be questioned, the whipping vans were to go out, official photographs were to be issued of public floggings, and one of the country's best journalists was to be arrested and photographs were to show him in chains.

This paragraph occurs on page 210, almost exactly halfway through *Among the Believers*, but it would be quite as appropriate, with a few modifications of detail, on almost any other page; and many or most of Naipaul's interjections, expostulations, ruminative asides, paroxysms of testiness provoked by brutal, ignorant, and "parasitic" Islam are quite as versatile and interchangeable. Maybe he ought to have looked at his idea in a different way, maybe he ought to have written a different book, maybe he ought to have observed less and

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thought more. Aside from his shrewd interviewing and reporting and the force of his obsession, the book he sat down and wrote is monotonously alarmist, it's as questionable as the hot-from-the-presses "news items" which according to Naipaul these nuts share with one another while they plot the takeover and regeneration of the decadent West: e.g. that Scandinavia ("always liberal and wise") has already "fallen" to Islam and "France was half Muslim; in England hundreds were converting every day." *Among the Believers* isn't a world-drama the portentous ending of which hasn't yet been written, it's *Grand Guignol* with Dracula makeup and howls from the wind-machines in the wings as Islamic fanaticism threatens the very foundations of civilization: The sky is falling! the sky is falling! "Nineteen seventy-three was the year of the oil-price rise, the year when money for Arab oil seemed to come like a reward for the Arab faith." But if the oil money was God-given, God was in one of those tricky and double-talking moods the West has become accustomed to, He was showing these belated nations that money isn't everything—as Naipaul points out in the smartest paragraph in his book:

> The pleasures of money in Malaysia were simple. Money magnified the limitations of places like Malaysia, small, uneducated, and coming late to everything. Money—from oil, rubber, tin, palm oil—changed old ways. But money only turned people into buyers of imported goods, fixed the country in a dependent relationship with the developed world, kept all men colonials.

"In August, at London airport, the Iranian passengers for Tehran had been loaded with the goods of Europe. Later that month, at Tehran airport, the Pakistani migrants going home had been loaded with the goods of Europe and Japan." These are the facts. Money doesn't produce goods, it can only buy them; the West may be the great Satan, but if you want goods and more than parochial political power there's no substitute for Western technology and mass-education (even when they speak Japanese; so thousands of Japanese children learn violin by the mass-teaching Suzuki method in order when grown up to play Viennese music in American and European symphony orchestras). Besides, as Naipaul never comes close to acknowledging, if the U.S. and the Soviet Union go to war over Persian Gulf oil, it won't have anything to do with Islam, any more than the Vietnam War had to do with Buddhism. Naipaul lets himself get so caught up in Third-World rhetoric that he sometimes ignores the likelier inferences and writes as if he half-believes this chickenhouse hubbub about the revolutionary power of Islam: Does he expect the Bedouins led by Rudolph Valentino to come sweeping like the simoom out of the desert descending on Bloomingdale's with fire and sword and no-limit Visa cards?

An idea that Naipaul touches on only in passing (though with graphic illustrations that should have alerted him to its significance)

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might have been a luckier one to take up: that it isn't just Western technology that makes the difference, it's a difference between peoples that nobody likes to mention in these days of cultural anthropology when we (in the West!) are taught to believe that a culture which practices human sacrifice isn't worse (or better) than one which doesn't, that a culture with a long history of energy and work and achievement isn't any better (though perhaps it's worse) than one in which the masses have been shitting all over the landscape from time immemorial. In Malaysia, for example, where the Chinese constitute less than half the population they do almost all the work and business (and are arbitrarily excluded from political power because otherwise they would have everything). Or in Indonesia: "Resentment of Chinese; of foreigners; of people with skills Indonesians didn't have"; and "the gentle Masood . . . had said, '*Millions* will have to die' " (many of these "gentle" Muslims are just aching to incite and command indispensable and gigantic massacres; "the idea of human quality," as Naipaul notes, "occurs only in certain societies"):

> And something like that was said to me in Jakarta by a businessman. We met late one afternoon in the restaurant of the hotel. He had been described to me as an economist, someone in touch with government departments, a man planning for the future. He was all that, but he also had the Indonesian feeling on things going wrong. And he was full of rage: against the Chinese (too gifted for Indonesia, "like Rolls-Royce spare parts in a Japanese car") . . .

—because he's too full of rage and self-pity (and maybe Naipaul, for the moment, equally oblivious, is also) to recall that in their grasp of technology the Japanese are already caught up with and beyond the British. "We have to kill a lot of people," says this Muslim planner: "Most of the Ph.D.'s are Chinese. They are like a cancer cell, ever growing and powerful, and they will destroy their surroundings, and we cannot stop it. If those people enter *any* system they always outdo and outsmart." Why can the Chinese (and Japanese) do what the Malaysians and Indonesians can't? Nineteenth-century travelers in Russia, as well as indignant nineteenth-century Russians, have written that, approaching a village in the outback, one could immediately identify it as either native Russian (ramshackle, sluggish, foul) or an immigrant German settlement (clean, orderly, well-constructed, cheerful). The will to work and learn is important, nor is it necessarily restricted to masters and conquerors (the Chinese continued to have it during their centuries of subservience to outsiders; the Jews have always had it); cultures differ in their recognition or encouragement of it, and these differences have the most extensive consequences over millennia of history. It's an idea that Eric Hoffer has been usefully reflecting on for decades, and it's a better idea than Naipaul's.

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VERNON YOUNG

# Poetry Chronicle: The Experts

HOLLEY MARTINS (*self-righteously*): I want to get to the bottom of things here! [in Vienna]
MAJOR CALLOWAY: Death's at the bottom of things, Martins. Leave death to the experts.
(from the film, *The Third Man*)

IN "A REMINISCENCE OF ANTONIO MACHADO," written in 1957, now republished by way of preface to this amplified edition,[1] Juan Ramón Jiménez said of the elder poet, "When I met him early in the morning, I had the impression that he had just arisen from the grave. He smelled from far away of metamorphosis." Since it is our common belief—is it not?—that *every* life-expression of the Spaniard is linked with death, this is a quite extraordinary conceit; if Jiménez found Machado exceptionally "a poet of death," we can take his word. But another glimpse of Machado, the man, from John Dos Passos (also included in this volume) makes an intriguing complementary judgment. "I remember him as a large sad fumbling man dressed like an old-fashioned schoolteacher." (Machado *was* an old-fashioned schoolteacher!) "There was no trace of worldliness about him. Long ago he had accepted the pain and ignominy of being what he was, a poet, a man who had given up all hope of reward to live for the delicately imagined mood, the counterpoint of words, the accurately recording ear." With these two partial portraits we can venture that the odor of mortality, which Jiménez inhaled so readily, the source of which he takes for granted (it was Machado's nature) may well have followed as a consequence of Machado's acceptance of the fate he willed: *to live apart from* his fellow-man (except insofar as he was required to teach him French!) and that thereafter he sacrificed, in his poetry, all merely human company to a reverent obsession with the Castilian landscape, expressed in image after image with an intensity of love indistinguishable from hate. One doubts that the loss of his fiancée was a crucial source of the sadness that permeates these exiguous but incandescent poems; her presence, if it *is* hers, becomes a name, little stronger than a sigh—Guiomar—within what he called, on one occasion, his "emotive geography." All his verse might be so entitled, since its principal burden is the contrast between Machado's childhood memories of Andalusia—"images of light and palm trees / And through a glo-

[1] THE DREAM BELOW THE SUN: Selected Poems of Antonio Machado. Trans. by *Willis Barnstone*. The Crossing Press. $6.95.

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ry of gold / . . . cranes on the belfries / cities with streets without women / under a violet sky"—and the wintry spaces of northern Spain where the sun, in these poems, is always sinking, distances are "bitter" and the blank hue of *white* is a dominant note in his stark poetic vocabulary: "a white stork"; "white shadows"; "the white road"; "whitish bark"; "white sierra gales"; "the white snow falling on the cold earth / from the white skies, as onto a grave." In the seventeenth century, he would have been one of those anonymous monks painting *bodegones* to the greater glory of God, if you can conceive of his painting still-life instead of blackened trees and violet mountains. Without disputing Jiménez' familiarity with the man, I must say that the body of Machado's verse (as much as we have of it here, translated by Barnstone with what I take to be a commendable transcription of the Spanish on the facing pages) does, to my ear and eye, savor less of death than of worship and of consistently *visual* transfiguration. It is of the same immaculate order as the paintings of Braque or the pianistic art of Wilhelm Backhaus, appearing to owe nothing to our eclectic century, existing apart and untouchable, beyond the scope of lecturers with their researched "influences" or their judgments on "utility" . . . At the last, life broke Machado, as it so often breaks the dedicated, by robbing him of the one thing he loved (with whatever ambivalence)—the Spanish earth. During the Civil War, sick unto death, he was transported in an ambulance across the Pyrenees; there in a French village he died. God has seldom been kind to the Spanish. I wonder if that's why they love Him with such ferocity.

To turn from Machado to sixteen Korean poets[2] is not as incongruous a shift as you might think. Korea has been another landscape of grief in (and before) our time and the response from its poets, if I may judge from those in this collection (their birth dates range from 1879 to 1941), has been obdurate yet relatively stoical, dictated either by the inability to speak out under the long Japanese suppression (as well as under the contemporary regime) or by a native inclination nourished by Buddhism and you might say undernourished by brutally inclement weather, from the sound of it, and a social and moral milieu of few attractions. Like Machado, these poets have been writing an "emotive geography." Allowing for numerous poems in which the seasons are employed symbolically to suggest political tyranny, unendurable patience, a thaw in the future or storms of revolution, one cannot avoid the suspicion that the *actual* climate is predominantly foul, that Korea is one of those countries too far north to be lived in without ice forming on the heart. In Machado's world, where the land is almost uniformly bleak, there are moments of chromatic relief when the poet sights "the erect coppery staffs of slender aspens," "white almonds like flowering butterflies," a rainbow over the washed plaza, "linnets in

[2] THE SILENCE OF LOVE: Twentieth-Century Korean Poetry. Ed. and with an Introduction by *Peter H. Lee.* University Press of Hawaii. $17.50; $8.95.

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the acacias." With fleeting wistfulness, the Korean may write of spring and plum blossoms, but the governing terms are "Winds blowing, villages wasting, / the flower-flesh of history rotting"—and snow, snow, snow. All but a few of these poems are uninhabited by defined personalities, save that of the speaker himself; the evasion of political subjects has not been replaced by the compensatory hum of daily relationships. I suppose that the absence of a metropolitan world and of urban conventions in the verse are responsible. When anything like a community *is* apotheosized, it is forcefully negative, implying that even without the Japanese Occupation or the war of recent years, Korean misery has deeper roots in a national predisposition and in the normal calamities of universal change. The following quotations are from three poets. "The whole day without laughter— / Coming home at the alley tavern / We try to smile but grimace / When we grasp friendly hands / They are cold and rough / We recoil from our haters—" "These are beasts wearing human masks / Men wearing animal masks. . . . They live at night, live in the day. / Born where we're born, the same blood / Runs in their veins. . . . Eighty percent servile spirit and the rest is gall. / From the times of fathers, grandfathers, / Great-grandfathers, great-great grandfathers, / North, south, east, west, / You kowtowed, bowed, beseeched on your knees." "At the heart of the city, / The mouse-faced and tiger-eyed / Without a slip, / Without a joke, without even a sign of their presence / Stamp the seal and make a promise / To meet you for the last time."

Peter Lee's principal introduction and those to the poets he has personally translated are indispensable: they tell us all we should need to know of the individual poet's history, whom of the Europeans (or Americans) he has been impressed by, in what political context he wrote. A considerable number of these poets has been under arrest at one time or another. (At the moment of publication, Kim Chi-ha, the youngest poet represented, has spent the last six years in prison for his criticism of the liberated regime of South Korea.) While polemic runs a red thread through this verse, it is not the exclusive mode; my attempt to convey the salient impression may have made it appear so. I did not find these poems depressing; they clutch at the heart because the prevailing experience is bitterly without saving satisfactions and the sixteen poets who bear witness to that experience have been tenacious in their resolve to find words that will endure longer than snowflakes chased by a gull.

We are so accustomed to Poland as a scenario for political outrage and fervent patriotism, for underground resistance and heroism modified by gallows humor, that the poetry of Wislawa Szymborska,[3] in which none of these subjects is visible, will come as a

[3] SOUNDS, FEELINGS, THOUGHTS: Seventy Poems, by *Wislawa Szymborska*. Trans. and introduced by *Magnus J. Krynski* and *Robert A. Maguire*. Princeton University Press. $17.95; $7.95.

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complete surprise unless we bear in mind that to live at the same time and in the same place as another is not necessarily to be his contemporary. The Polish poets of the immediate post-World War II years best known to us are Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Różewicz. Of the same age, more or less, as Miss Szymborska, they are exclusively poets of the aftermath. Milosz writes from exile; Różewicz has advanced into a livid silence; Herbert, who shares with Miss Szymborska a saving interest in art and antiquity, contrives to mitigate his bitterness with erudition. Since Szymborska did not share, in their terms, their season in hell, she can scarcely be expected to write in a comparable vein. Yet Krynski and Maguire, who have translated her with a scrupulous simulation of her levities, her accents, hesitations and playful sonorities, are unable to take this or anything else, including the reader's intelligence, for granted. Perhaps, having themselves previously translated Różewicz and fearful that Szymborska will not be approved in the groves of the American academy (where a ducking-stool lurks at the bottom of the garden for those convicted of frivolity), they insist in pedestrian detail, throughout their preface, on her range of learning and her "high seriousness." The former, lightly conveyed in the poems, needs no gloss; the latter description is gloomily inadequate: nothing more embarrassing than to be told that a wit is *fundamentally* serious! Miss Szymborska is her own best exponent. A stanza from "Written in a Hotel" is all the manifesto she needed.

> For everyday purposes I believe in permanence,
> in the prospects for history.
> I can't go on munching apples
> in constant terror.

The point to be made about Szymborska, in these poems written since 1967, is that she is a poet before she is a woman as such; a European before she is a Pole and an Epicurean first and last. Her temper is Classical; her targets, the Apollonian ones: all rages of omniscience, ubiquity and self-regard; all unearned despair; the vanity of the short view, the complacency of the long one.

> I apologize to coincidence for calling it necessity.
> I apologize to necessity in case I am mistaken.
> Let happiness be not angry that I take it as my own.
> Let the dead not remember they scarcely smoulder in my memory. . . .
> I apologize to everything that I cannot be everywhere.
> I apologize to everyone that I cannot be every man and woman.
> I know that as long as I live nothing can justify me,
> because I myself am an obstacle to myself.

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Take it not amiss, O speech, that I borrow weighty words,
and later try hard to make them seem light.

In the face of these subtle equivocations, her translators' urge to explain her are unhelpfully ponderous. "Szymborska does not know why man came to be [she *doesn't*?] but, now that he is here, he can look forward to new stages of development; and she is filled with wonder at the thought of what he may amount to." Sentence by sentence, they iron out every nuance they have beautifully translated, as if justifying Szymborska to a night-class at the YWHA.

Muse of the anti-climax and the second look, Szymborska, if not at home everywhere, as she ironically disclaims, *is* at home almost anywhere if she senses paradox or finds an enhancing contradiction—as in the art of Rubens, where she celebrates not only the "Giantesses, female fauna / naked as the rumbling of barrels" but also "Their slender sisters who had risen earlier, / before dawn broke in the picture. / No one noticed how, single file, they / had moved to the canvas's unpainted side. / Exiles of style. . . . The thirteenth century would have given them a golden / background, the twentieth a silver screen. / The seventeenth had nothing for the flat of chest." I wish I had known, years ago, her poem concerning a film-maker of the sixties (whose identity takes little guesswork). "Yesterday he ran over a cat. Yes, that was a good idea. / The cat was released from the inferno of the age." And the poem ends with a prayer (still unanswered): "O god of humor, do something about him. / O god of humor, you must do something about him."

Her most resounding achievement, in my choosing, is "Monologue for Cassandra"; its subject (Ibsen's, too), the dire consequences of being right. (I'm quoting three of its six stanzas.)

Now I remember distinctly
how people, on seeing me, stopped in mid-syllable.
Laughter broke off.
Hands pulled apart.
Children ran to their mothers.
I did not even know their evanescent names.
And that song about the green leaf—
no one finished it in my presence.

I loved them.
But I loved them from on high.
From above life.
From the future. Where it is always empty
and where nothing is easier than to see death.
I regret that my voice was harsh.
Just look at yourselves from the stars, I called out,
just look at yourselves from the stars.
They heard me and lowered their eyes.

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. . . .
I told you so.
Except nothing follows from it.
And this is my fair garment singed by fire.
And these are my prophet's odds and ends.
And this is my contorted face.
The face that did not know it could be beautiful.

("I regret that my voice was harsh": the canny modulation of that line!) She is in the great tradition, this woman: that of the eternally modern; she has the gift of historical perspective, our secret agent for reconciling our disillusion with our passion for inquest. Clearly she believes, without raising her voice, that language is the mother of discrimination; that with it you can even distinguish poetry from prose. "Prose may have everything, poetry included / but *poetry must have nothing but poetry.*"

Mine are the italics and I realize that today they raise a question instead of settling it. All the same, I believe that in practice the alternatives are self-evident. If Robert Penn Warren had heeded such advice he might have long since justified the rank he now occupies in the opinion of too many critics beside Dave Smith. Two years ago I accompanied a brief review (not for this magazine) of Mr. Warren's previous volume with the remark that had I been a publisher and those poems had been submitted, no matter whose name was attached, I would have rejected them. My review was paid for, choked down (I assume) and never published. A conspiracy is abroad not to let this man go unhyped into that dark night. Mr. Warren has not been without honor in his own country. On the back cover of the present selection[4] nineteen prestigious awards, besides special appointments, are listed. He has been for so long an object of esteem in American fiction and on American faculties that no one now is about to protest that his poetry, always diffuse, always tending to be obscure in its thought and amorphous in its craft, is finally a travesty of itself and an unreconstructed example of what the modern revolution in poetic diction has precisely striven to overcome and eradicate.

Unmercifully on display in these poems is Warren's tireless resort to compound similes and cosmic pathetic fallacies. I am hanged if I can see (or hear) the appropriateness of a stream in a gorge grinding its teeth "like a maniac / In sleep" (maniacs don't grind their teeth when awake?) nor of "a nameless apprehension / That doglike, at night, in darkness, [why does he need *in darkness*?] may be at the foot of your bed" (after that, he yet adds, loop after loop, "Its tail now and then thumping the floor, with a sound that / Wakes you up"). "After Restless Night," in the same nocturnal vein, begins with the kind of vatic fallout frowned on by Szymborska. "In dark-

[4] RUMOR VERIFIED: Poems 1979–1980, by *Robert Penn Warren.* Random House. $9.95; $5.95.

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ness we cannot see / How, all night long, slow ages shift and crumble / Into the noble indifference of Eternity. . . . nor can we in silence of night hear / How aeons are deleafing, year by year, / To build the rotting mulch of History." It's just as well we can't! In possibly three among these poems, Mr. Warren manages to evoke a creature or an event without inflating his recital to a pitch of incoherence and Capitalization Fever. "English Cocker; Old and Blind" is one of the best; the death of an animal restrains him as the hopes of man do not. When he reaches for metaphor and the mystery of life he is irreclaimable. Of all his idiosyncrasies the most infuriating is his asking rhetorical questions in costume-archaic speech and in the belief that since they are unanswerable they confirm his escape from the irritation of the definable. "The green twine of vine . . . thinks it is God. / Can you think of some ground on which that may be gainsaid?" Yes, on the ground of natural history! "What / Can the sea tell us of a drop we cup in the hand?" Very much, if we are marine biologists. "What, as the tide slinks away, can a drop / Caught on the landward side of a pebble, / Tell us of the blind depth of groan out yonder?" Very little, actually. I mean to say, you can't ask too much of a drop, can you, especially of one caught on the landward side? "But do / We even know the meaning of / A single comet's mathematical prowl?" Daddy is tired of answering questions. He invented the wheel today.

If I were rich as well as disputatious, I would buy two thousand copies of John Hollander's guide to English verse[5] and distribute them to inceptive poets scattered across the land in Creative Writing workshops who are being encouraged to write from their experience before they've had any and to write free verse with only the haziest exposure to the art of the unfree. That hundreds of these thousands would start chiming like bells I have no hope—I'd not be happier if they did; I simply feel that inspired by Hollander's personal example they might renew their ear (their collective ear) for poems which have nothing but poetry; at least they would be diverted from trying to pursue the meaning of a single comet's mathematical prowl. Mr. Hollander has not rested content by providing students with examples from the literature of the basic metrical elements and most of the stanzaic forms they've ever heard of, from the couplet and the quatrain to the villanelle, the sestina and that marvellous anomaly, the *pantoum*; he has composed every specimen *himself*! For that reason alone, even if you have no designs on the creation of schematic verse, Mr. Hollander's performance is recommended to your attention; should you not care to be instructed, you will be entertained. Were I to begin quoting his ingenious anthology, I would quickly regret I hadn't chosen some other example. Suffice it to say that he duplicates most of the strategic variants in

[5] RHYME'S REASON: A Guide to English Verse, by *John Hollander*. Yale University Press. $12.95; $3.95.

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the history of verse form, from Skelton and Spenser to Ogden Nash and the ordered meanders of free verse as written by A. R. Ammons or Laurence Lieberman. For me, the most important reminder in Mr. Hollander's short, definitive manual, is the premise of his elucidations. "Poetic form as we know it is an abstraction from, or residue of, musical form, from which it came to be divorced when writing replaced memory as a way of preserving poetic utterance in narrative, prayer, spell and the like. The ghost of oral poetry never vanishes, even though the conventions and patterns of writing reach out across time and silence all actual voices." A sad reflection, that one about ghosts. In America today, more poetry is being written than ever before; scarcely anyone who writes it can *read* it (aloud); were he able, he would have no one, outside Manhattan, who would listen; and nobody reads *him* except other poets and some critics.

From the quarterlies I have received the impression that in Ireland all poets face the east every dawn and pray, "Please, Mary Mother of God, let me not write like W. B. Yeats!" I expect it's an exaggeration. Eavan Boland (the only female Irish poet I've heard of since Oscar Wilde's grandmother), is in no danger.[6] If there's a principal Irishman among her influences, it would be James Joyce; but I could be in error, persuaded by her very latest poems in which she sounds like Molly Bloom whipped into fury by seeing herself, in a crucial flash, as woman and fatally beset. Whoever may be the fount of her vindictive eloquence (the root is of course the daily speech in a country where language has not been emasculated by the radical separation of thought from culture), hers is the most startling arrival since Seamus Heaney's. The contents of *Introducing Eavan Boland* represent two slim volumes five years apart, 1975 and 1980; what happened to her poetry in those interim years is what happened to her, better defined as a mutation than as a development; even better, as an eruption. Clues to the subsequent poems are latent in the motifs of imprisonment that surface in such earlier works as "Prisoners," which opens with a lion in the zoo ("his rages / Had been left behind . . . as bored as a socialite / With her morning post, I saw him slit / A rabbit open like an envelope") and ends with the man upstairs: "Your pullover lies on the bed . . . where / You can no more free yourself from the bars / Of your arms around me than can over / Us the lion flee, silently, his stars." The motif is sustained in two measured diatribes on that rational fungus of our age, Suburbia ("the claustrophobia / Of your back gardens varicose / With shrubs") and reaches a climax with the archetype Eavan Boland finds in a man named Lynch, magistrate and First Citizen of Galway in 1493, who hanged his son in the interests of justice. ("We

[6] INTRODUCING EAVAN BOLAND: Poems. Ontario Review Press. $5.95 p.

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hanged our son, our only son / And hang him still and still we call it law.")[7]

From the first lines of her first poem in the most recent group, "In Her Own Image," all forensic subjects are exiled. Increasingly self-concentrated and impeccably scornful, she wants revenge ("Tirade for the Mimic Muse"):

> With what drums and dances, what deceits,
> Rituals and flatteries of war,
> Chants and pipes and witless empty rites
> And war-like men
> And wet-eyed patient women
> You did protect yourself from horrors,
> From the lizarding of eyelids
> From the whiskering of nipples,
> From the slow betrayals of our bedroom mirrors—

Her stanzas thereafter are shortened into trimeters that rush down the page, partita-like, as if she were only restraining with her eye the angered fluency of her hand and ear. The result is not ingratiating but it is stunning. From "Anorexic": "Flesh is heretic. / My body is a witch. / I am burning it. / Yes, I am torching / her curves and paps and wiles. / They scorch in my self-denials / How she meshed my head / in the half-truths / of her fevers / till I renounced / milk and honey / and the taste of lunch. / I vomited / her hungers. / Now the bitch is burning . . ." From "Witching": "My gifts are nightly, / shifty, bookish. / By my craft / I bald the grass, / abort the birth / of calves / and warts / I study dark." We have been here before, have we not? but American feminist resentment has little of Miss Boland's art: the spare, polished invective, the speed and punctiliousness of vowels and alliterations clashing or consorting, the almost contemptuous economy of statement in a single poem. Whether or not the tigers of wrath are *wiser* than the horses of instruction, when leashed they are formidably more sensuous. Eavan Boland's language shortens the distance between the condition and the image: in its own ferocious way confirming Seamus Heaney's peerless definition, "that moment when the bird sings very close / To the music of what happens."

Larry Levis[8] is haunted by the vicarious experience, the fleeting glimpse, the passing rumor (a woman glancing up from a river, the girl on the bed in Edward Hopper's painting, *Hotel Room*, an alcoholic car thief, professing himself on a park bench), or by a person-

[7] This is the origin, surely, of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, *Weir of Hermiston*. And is it not likely that the verb, *to lynch*, derived from this man, predating by 300 years the attribution to Judge Lynch of Lynchburg, Virginia?

[8] THE DOLLMAKER'S GHOST, by *Larry Levis*. Dutton. $6.25 p.

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al memory to which he is only now supplying dimensions. At their most characteristic, the poems are confined to the barrens of the West and Midwest: a few, those closest to home, are sentimental; others are casuistic, often beyond his powers to clarify as he elaborates them. Yet in sum they make up a world, consistently embraced and, within the limits of his will to be inconclusive, explored. His best narratives open with an atmospheric prelude, like this one, to the poem, "Adah":

> I can remember the almost private outburst
> Of rain on the tin sheds:
> A sound as precise as a small fire taking hold
> Of its kindling;
> Or, when the rain stopped, the drone of flies
> And their shining—
> And how the horses outside
> Would lift and drop a hoof in the pasture
> As they grazed. . . .

The serene closeup introduces the nominal subject, a story—in this case a recall and another story that ends in murder far from where the poem began, but remaining in the minor key. Levis employs this method, most of the time adroitly, but with the same risk taken that Philip Levine takes, where, reluctant to let go of the periodic sentence (of short lines), as he is reluctant to let go of the intermediate subject he has reached for, he adds another modifying clause and overstates his concern: the momentum slackens, the prosaic ensues. But listen to Levis where he brings it off, in this striking parenthesis within the long poem, "Some Ashes Drifting Above Piedra, California" (which actually begins with an abandoned shack in a field, an imagined occupant staring at the sky):

> . . . .
> I heard once,
> Of two lovers, who
> Naked, and for a joke
> Tied themselves together with cast off clothes.
> And leaped into a canal—
> Where the current held them under a whole hour.
> I thought, then,
> How each of them must have said all that can
> Be said
> Between a man and a woman—
> As they fought each other to breathe,
> Or, which is the same thing,
> To be whole, and lonely again.
> But I was wrong:
> They only stiffened, and there were no words left
> Inside them—

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The man lay face down in the stillness;
The woman faced the sky.
Bobbing in the thick grass beside the banks,
Their arms whitened around each other for three days
In the stale water . . .
Now they are these words.

I could have curtailed this quotation at line six, line thirteen, lines fifteen, seventeen or twenty; the strophe would have been self-sufficient; but the beauty of Levis' execution is in the additive melody, in the elegiac pause and renewal and muted contradictions, in the mortal detail and in the final consecration of the poet's Amen. If Levis is not victimized by his facility, if he doesn't *hang on* to the pity of it all, he will make an enduring contribution to the monologue form. For the kind of poetry he wants to write, he has taken possession of a fundamental requirement: the necessary euphemism with which compassion redeems the unlived life.

Whereas Levis tries to get inside everything, enticed by secrecy and by infinite chains of suggestion, William Clipman, in his first book of poems, buries his past, moves on, keeps his distance and from the present takes mainly what he can see and touch without the anxieties of excessive interrogation.[9] My inference is supported, I feel, by the manifest conviction and structure of his poem, "The Muskrat," which so overpowers every other poem in this collection that I am led to suppose it expounds his most importunate experience; that upon completing it and closing the subject, he found nowhere as exciting to go, although he is equipped as a poet to go anywhere when he is beckoned by a crisis as indelible. From that seminal poem I'm quoting a stanza from the fourth section.

Begin to work the coat upward from the tail,
slicing the fibers that bind it to muscle.
The exposed underskin blushes blue-red.
Over the head, with cuts around the ears and eyes,
and off with a snap at the nose.
The eyes stand bald on the red skull,
two beads of sweat from the brow of darkness
radiating the even luster of black pearl.
The viscera, so orderly and colorful
like a gift box of wrapped sweets,
demand respect. They have worked hard.
You lift the carcass onto a newspaper
and roll it into a sort of shroud.
The print runs with juice,
and the musk is on you now like a skin,
and the death smell is on you like a skin.

[9] DOG LIGHT, by *William Clipman*. Wesleyan University Press. $5.95 p.

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Superb: a ritual passage, of course, in an initiation ceremony; in the final sequence the boy who is telling it all merges with his reflection in the frigid water of the creek, "barking and chirring at the brilliant winter moon"; he has become the thing he killed. Clipman's dogged step-by-step rehearsal of the trapping and skinning of this animal has something in it of William Heyen's obsession with the cat he shot, as if by faithfully exhuming every move, the way it was, he could exorcize the spell which has burdened him until now. The same concentration, with a lighter touch, informs other poems in *Dog Light*: one about Clipman's delight in the recovery of wooden spoons after an explosion—"Because they are an understandable truth / and have stuck with you through the worst of it." There is a refreshing love of *things* in these poems. Clipman's understandable truths are, for the present, empirical, but for all his dry caution and the basic idom of his "domestic" poems, he has a surprising number of voices. From "Somewhere North of Here":

> There is an intimate ferocity
> in the way we reveal ourselves to one another,
> a singing in the jawbone
> like thin steel struck on thin steel.

or this, from "The Wayward Apostle: Lines to Peter":

> You have always been first among the twelve
> though you delight in sedition, the good quarrel, chivalry.
> You ask the tough questions.
> Even your stray denials find direction
> by the grace of your loving heart.
> It would be just like you to ask
> to be nailed upside down in deference to me,
> radiant in your public self-effacement.

or again, an aside from the sketchy panorama of America in "The Long Way Home" (this is Tennessee):

> In Crossville, on Genesis Road—
> I wish I were making this up—
> there is a church and a graveyard
> with peavines dragging the stones down.
> Inside a preacher
> rehearses.
> I do not go in—
> what would either of us say?

As I implied, there is something provisional about all his poems when put beside "The Muskrat." He is looking for a subject—or deliberately he is not looking, which is good, too. With his concrete sense of the time, the place and the cue, the subject will find him.

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G. E. MURRAY

# Two Poets

ONE OF THE BEAUTIES of contemporary poetry is that it allows you to impose experiments on reality without going to the trouble of actually changing the world. Poems can become then, variously, matters of instructive alteration, strategic repair, or wishful enhancement. That's the theory, at least, though many efforts are little more than cotton-candy concessions whose products dissolve too quickly and leave behind a sticky residue. Examples abound.

Less common, of course, are poetries that come to inform some advancement or belief, however satisfying or troublesome, from which to proceed. In this light, Robert Phillips' second collection in three years reformulates a healthy share of this poet's fates and fortunes, uncovers why and how "We've become where we have been."

Phillips' latest, *Runing on Empty*,[1] takes a significantly different direction from that set forth in earlier work, notably *The Pregnant Man*. There Phillips displayed an appetite for literary decorum. Erudite, polished, technically accomplished, those poems seemed not as fine as the craftsmanship that formed them. Happily, this new work, taken in its breadth, achieves a greater emotional consistency by relinquishing some of composition's ornament.

It also should be noted that Phillips' new title is derived from pop composer Jackson Browne's upbeat California country-rock anthem. It should be further clarified that Phillips' patient causes strike no relationship to Browne's pulsating lyrics, and indeed are about as trendy as a hoola-hoop. What does emerge at first inspection from Phillips' borrowed title is a tentative and occasionally clumsy performance—one seemingly predisposed to dabbling in minor events or "bluffing our way / through Kool-Aid afternoons." To be sure, Phillips could be faulted for posturing as an oracle of the obvious, dwelling on the insignificant, and applauding his own forced cleverness ("Spring tumbles down / like circus clowns / from a trick automobile").

Yet the book at large is presumably after larger issues, namely, an evaluation of the poet's life tumbling toward middle-age with all its "weather marks, / stretch marks, traumas of all sorts." In this Phillips is more compelling, depicting a blatantly normal world with the illogic of associative memory. For Phillips, past tends to be present, as he recalls bittersweet snatches from adolescence and family history in Laurel, Delaware. This is particularly the case with the twelve-part sequence "Ninety Miles from Nowhere," which depends

[1] RUNNING ON EMPTY: New Poems, by *Robert Phillips*. Doubleday. $9.95; $4.95.

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mainly upon accumulation for its final effect. Phillips risks most when seizing upon the odd and the trivial—a fenceless gate, the importance of beans, holiday disappointments—but this is more a means of working by indirection to establish the poet's key theme in this work: belonging in terms of dislocation. It's a life-heightening premise.

Certainly, too, "the lure of chicanery" remains with Phillips, adept at lulling readers into contentment with an ice cream-social style, only to conclude that "The boy becomes a man of shopworn tricks, / in a world with no trapdoor." At last, Phillips is a survivor with a sense of humor and purpose, well-equipped to speak to such realities as cancer's threat ("Lump") or the world as vibrant artifact:

> All out-of-doors wants in, all in-of-doors, out.
> Something wild in the mildest of us shouts.
> These creatures, sniffing in strange civility,
> would huddle close and comfort us, if they could.

On such dear subjects Phillips seldom falters. His quirky point of view combines the serious and the silly, anguish and doubt, the tender and mundane. In *Running on Empty*, cloudy dreamscapes eventually give way to moments of inexplicable, if sometimes naively stated, clarity. He sees things and manages to reproportion them into aspects of meaningful life.

In only his second collection, *The Ruined Motel*,[2] Reginald Gibbons proves exquisite in keeping the storyteller's ancient bargain with his audience: Making them need to find out what happens next. In a manner that is at once quiet, intense, and informative, Gibbons controls language and situation in such ways as to make the real and the rarefied one. Here is the opening illumination from his title narrative:

> Give the mourning doves any sun
> at all and they will begin to grieve.
> Their song, riding the steam that poured up
> from the snow on the window-ledge,
> came in to us as we scanned
> the damp wreck of a seaside room,
> all the things no one inherited:
> the sour pink and beige paint,
> a throng of water-stain shapes
> on the walls—splotchy heads
> and moldy animal herds—and behind us
> brown vines leaning in at the door
> to greet the webs and frost-burnt
> mushrooms in the closet.

[2] THE RUINED MOTEL, by *Reginald Gibbons*. Houghton Mifflin. $10.95; $5.95.

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Gibbons relates without explaining, describes without distancing, transports without misdirecting. And all the while one must believe him when he posits: "This is the truth, not the taut / cicada-strummed daylight." Speaking with the presence of a man who has something vital to say, to purify with words, Gibbons elucidates love's guilts, anxieties and certainties in both graphic and touching ways:

> Your hand in your grandfather's—
> as though the bone just beneath the skin
> had cleared his thin flesh
> and called out the skeletal glow
> in your own fingers, too soon.
> Bone against bone, surprising you,
> bruises you both with dread.
> Morphine, stitched incisions, nausea—
> and your father sits in a chair,
> his hands on his knees, still
> brooding on the blood that made him faint.
> While you wait now, holding yourself
> together with the hurting that threads
> its way through you, cold and hot.

A mature awareness of the trek from adolescence into manhood dominates the collection in a tender, thoughtful fashion, especially in the series "At Latitude Thirty." These pivotal poems are composed with subtle rhythmic assonance and with vivid yet delicate handling of detail that creates extraordinary effects in individual pieces and in the sequence as a whole. At one point, condensing leaps in time, Gibbons struggles with causes and effects from his Texas upbringing, engaging again "summer's suffering, a turmoil / of horned toads and hospitals, the streets / that memory depopulates till / the dust on hot fenders speaks louder / than any living things. / *Wake up, wake up— / Daddy has your breakfast on the table.*"

Such passages underscore Gibbons' regard for the restorative process in light of separation. Separation here means departure not only from family, lovers and children, but separation from all the precedents of a lifetime, including family, lovers, children and friends who have gone before. Thus, restoration may also swell with family, lovers *et al.* in a lifetime to come. As such, each of Gibbons' poems sketches a story, minimal though some may be, and given a reader's willing attention, each can offer unusual and useful lessons in close observation. This is an open-hearted book of self-examination from a poet clearly intent upon becoming a necessary voice of poetic control and conscience.

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RICHMOND LATTIMORE

# Embarrassed with Riches

THERE HAVE BEEN BEFORE NOW VARIOUS COLLECTIONS designed to give large samplings of the literature of the world through translations into English. I know two such works which are specifically confined to poetry. In 1929 Mark Van Doren published his *Anthology of World Poetry*, and in 1952 Hubert Creekmore followed with his *Little Treasury of World Poetry* (not so little; 872 pages). Both are now out of print. There was also George Steiner with *The Penguin Book of Poetry in Modern Translation*, which I have never seen. It, too, seems to be out of print, at least in this country. Now Charles Tomlinson presents us with something unprecedented, a big anthology[1] chosen and arranged according to the *translators*, from the sixteenth century to the present day, rather than to the poems translated; an anthology not of world poetry in English translation, but of translators into English. It follows, formally at least, in the tradition of Oxford Books begun in 1900 by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch with the first edition of his *Oxford Book of English Verse*.

In theory, then, for his 590 pages, Tomlinson has available the whole of the poetry of the ages if and when it has been translated into English. In view of the vast amount of material, there must be some organizing principles for inclusion and exclusion. In the preface to his first edition, Quiller-Couch said: "I have tried to range over the whole field of English Verse . . . and to choose the best." It is hard to imagine a contemporary anthologist stating the matter with such artless (or serene) simplicity; in any case, Quiller-Couch did not have to deal with the question, what are the best *translations*, leading to the supplementary question, what do we mean by translation. In his introduction, Tomlinson struggles with the problem. We can begin with his acceptance of Donald Davie's dictum: "Translation is something that takes more liberties (i.e. takes on more responsibilities) than a trot, but denies itself the liberties of the imitation and other relations more tenuous still." Be it noted, however, that in fact Tomlinson has included some imitations and free adaptations, from Wyatt and Campion to Pound and Logue. The emphasis is really on the abjuring of literalness and of the attempt to achieve a mirror image of the original whether in sense or form. Above all, poetry must be translated into poetry. Therefore, not by scholars who are expert in the language they are facing but amateurs in the craft of poetry; better, by professional poets even if they are inexpert in the language of the original. The whole tenor of the introduction is anti-academic. And so too with the collection

[1] THE OXFORD BOOK OF VERSE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION, selected and ed. by *Charles Tomlinson*. Oxford University Press. $37.50.

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itself; as far as I know, the only professional scholar who makes it is A. E. Housman (also, of course, a first-rate poet) with one piece.

So what are we given? First, the reviewer, also faced with a mass of material, may be allowed to draw some lines of his own. I find it convenient to divide this whole anthology into two parts. Part One goes from Gavin Douglas (early sixteenth century) through Christopher Smart; Part Two, from Cowper through Romantics, Victorians, and Moderns down to the present. The division, which I find useful, may be arbitrary, but it is with Cowper that Homer goes into blank verse after the couplets of Dryden and Pope; and with this division the anthology falls into two nearly equal (but substantively quite different) parts, the earlier being still a little the larger.

Part One is by far the more predictable, and necessarily conservative. There is something of a dearth of translation specialists (Douglas and Golding are so acknowledged and represented); in the main, the major translators are the major poets, and almost all the great names are there, Shakespeare being the big exception. Tomlinson has, however, shown much diligence in searching out a number of obscurer practitioners, of varying quality. And what of the medium? It is a matter of principle again, and here is Dryden, or a part of him, quoted in the introduction: "A verse translation has to be done in the only verse that the translator, at the time of writing, can make." That has meant different things to different translators. It was natural for Wyatt and Spenser to render Italian and French sonnets as English sonnets. Wyatt's paraphrases of the Vulgate are in his own *terza rima*. On the other hand, the Authorized or King James Version of the Scriptures is really prose into prose, and I question whether it should have been included here, though the anthologists of world poetry have also done so. But what Dryden's pronouncement meant for Dryden seems to be, in part, that he rendered classical originals into appropriate English forms of verse; Homer, Vergil, Ovid, and Theocritus into heroic couplets, Horace into rhymed stanzas, without any attempt to reconstruct the original metres (unless "Pindarique Verse" was really thought to be such a reconstruction).

Without saying that he has tried to choose the best, Tomlinson does imply it again and again. A good translated poem must be a good poem in English. We are entitled to ask, how do these famous poets of the earlier period stand up? There is no questioning the mastery of Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser and Vaughan in their translations. In my own view, while Donne, Herrick, Carewe, Lovelace and Prior surely deserve a place in such a collection, they do little to add to their great and deserved reputations. The same might almost be said of Marlowe, Jonson, and Milton. But these seem almost like incidental translators compared with the poets most heavily represented: Golding, Chapman, Dryden, and Pope, who among the four of them take up almost one-sixth of the entire volume.

Dryden and Pope are, of course, masters of versification in the medium of their choice (be it noted that the selections from Pope's

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*Odyssey* here included are not from the hands of Broome or Fenton). If the manner of Dryden seems not very like that of his originals, and Pope's, as Bentley pointed out, even less so, that is not due to ineptitude. They chose the way they wanted to do it and they did it. For historical reasons if no others, Golding must be represented. His mastery is less evident:

> Neare Enna walles there standes a Lake Pergusa is the name.
> Cayster heareth not mo songs of Swannes than doth the same.[2]

But he can show a kind of quaint (possibly accidental) charm. Here is Hippomenes' view of Atalanta running:

> The wynd ay whisking from her feete the labells of her socks
> Uppon her back as whyght as snowe did tosse her golden locks,
> And eeke thembroydred garters that were tyde beneathe her ham.

Chapman, alike in the fourteeners of his *Iliad* and the heroic couplets of his *Odyssey*, shows versatility and spirit. His chief fault as a translator is over-interpretation. There is little of this in what Tomlinson has chosen, but an example comes where Odysseus recovers his raft: "Yet he left not so / His drenched vessell, for the overthrow / Of her nor him, but gat at length againe / (Wrestling with Neptune) hold of her, and then / Sate in her Bulke, insulting over Death." No; he neither wrestled with Neptune (perish the thought) nor insulted over Death. These are gratuitous. But note the sinewy texture of the lines.

Still, the transference of originals into close forms of English verse can cause awkwardness. "Whom sweetly sing he heard" (Chapman) is not a good phrase. There is some bad or mediocre writing in this first part; I give a few examples: "Who exposed to others Ey's / Into his own Heart ne'r pry's, / Death to him's a Strange surprise" (Marvell); "The boy goes with the maids, yet none / Will trust, or think love tame is grown, / If they perceive that any where / He Arrows doth about him bear" (Stanley); "Another follow'd with his Bow, / Pushing to make him faster go; / Who most unwillingly obey'd, / For he of VENUS was afraid" (Ayres); "The Man, who Infamy to shun, / Into the Arms of Death would run, / That Man is ready to defend / With Life his Country, or his Friend" (Swift). (Note that, in his introduction, Tomlinson quoted Olson to emphasize the importance of the *ear*, and the bad translations that result from its failure.) I could quote some rather awful lines by Cowley, but their badness is less simple ineptitude than a lapse of taste alike by the translator and his original poet, who happens to be Catullus. Still, Cowley did write the lines. A better illustration is Congreve giving us Andromache's lament for Hector:

[2] Here, and in all quotations, I am assuming that Tomlinson has faithfully reproduced his texts.

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I, with my Child, must the same Fortune share,
And all alike, be Pris'ners of the War;
'Mongst base-born Wretches he, his Lot must have,
And be to some inhuman Lord, a Slave.
Else some avenging Greek, with Fury fill'd,
Or for an only Son, or Father kill'd
By Hector's hand, on him will vent his Rage,
And with his Blood his thirsty grief asswage;
For many fell by his relentless Hand,
Biting that Ground, which with their Blood was stain'd.

Even if this is not thought to be outrageously bad, at least it exemplifies a kind of mediocrity which is all too easily found in a collection whose standard—in view of what was available and what has been omitted—ought to be high and strict.

In sum, I think Tomlinson has given us too much in his first part. Aside from the well-known masters already mentioned, he has produced some delightful (brief) surprises from Drummond of Hawthornden, Philip Francis, and Allan Ramsay. The talents of Sir John Harington and Sir Richard Fanshawe are something of a revelation. But he has not got enough good poetry from his lesser names. There is too much that is too much alike; and as I approached the end of the period, even from such able practitioners as Dryden and Pope the parade of end-stopped couplets left me feeling slugged, and it was a great relief, in the case of epic translation, to come to the supple, straightforward, and at the same time singularly faithful blank verse of Cowper toward the end of the eighteenth century.

Here begins what I have arbitrarily called Part Two of this anthology, and we are in a whole new world of translated poetry. The variety of originals enlarges and will continue to do so from the Romantics to the present day. In the first part, versions were drawn mainly from Greek, Latin, and Italian; now we shall find German, Spanish, Chinese, and various other languages including even American Indian. Modes of English verse will become more varied, especially with the growing use of free verse in the twentieth century. As Tomlinson says in his introduction: "After 1910 a translation explosion takes place." Just the brute number of available translators increases enormously. But, as we have seen, Part Two is not bulkier than Part One, nor is it as rich as might have been expected. For one thing, Tomlinson has excluded dramatic verse, except for some choral passages (in particular, a harmless meditation from Seneca's *Thyestes* which attracted at least five translators). He has also tended to pass over the linguists in translation in favor of getting what he can out of the original poets. For the nineteenth century, you will find the names of almost all the stars. But it must be said that while Shelley, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Rossetti show real brilliance in translation, others, like Wordsworth, Scott, Coleridge, Byron, and Meredith have contributed little besides the lustre of their names.

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The same informing principles hold for the selection from the copious twentieth-century material. Poets, not scholars; and rather little that tries to recapture the forms of the original. "In translating rhymed verse the rhyme is the first thing to go, and metre the second: whereas the amateur, wretched sceptic that he is, cannot be sure of having poetry at all unless he has these external features of it" (once again, Donald Davie quoted in the introduction). It is not really quite as bad as you would expect. Exceptions have been allowed, for the Tudor and Elizabethan poets, for Swinburne's Villon, and for Rossetti, whose sestina of Dante is translated as a sestina (and how else, I wonder, would you render a sestina, whose essence is in its form?). In the modern section, there are excellent formal versions of Villon, Belli, and Mallarmé by Tom Scott, Robert Garioch, and Douglas Young, all Scots, as it happens; and there is Marianne Moore's La Fontaine.

But the most favored modern translator is, predictably, Pound, here represented as working mostly from the Chinese. His versification is in the accepted style of his time, for which he is to a great extent responsible; his lack of Chinese is, for this anthology, no disadvantage. And it has to be admitted that Pound from the Chinese reads excellently well, free from the affectations that invade some of the rest of his work. My only complaint is that, as there was too much of a good thing in Dryden, there is a disproportionate amount of Pound. Space has been left for some strong pieces by Lowell and welcome surprises from Lady Gregory, Hugh MacDiarmid, J. B. Leishman, Michael Alexander, and some others. Still, the last part of this anthology strikes me as scrappy, the more so when we consider what might have been there.

I know, a foreseen tedious objection. And this is not an anthology of world poetry where the reader would go to find out something about, say, Hesiod, Pindar, Pushkin, Rimbaud, George, Cavafy, Borges, or Yevtushenko, all in fact missing. But of translators the salon des refusés is illustrious.

The exclusion of dramatic verse eliminates MacNeice's *Agamemnon*. I suppose Gilbert Murray would not have made it anyway, though his ear was as fine as his language is, often, embarrassing. Longfellow's occasional great felicities as a translator have gone unnoticed; so has Robert Bridges' austerely beautiful rendering of a stretch of *The Aeneid* into English quantitative hexameters, along with the more fluid and racy Vergilian hexameters of Day Lewis. I miss E. Powys Mather's lovely "Black Marigolds" from the Sanskrit, and Lawrence Binyon's *Divine Comedy*. It is hard to believe that neither Robert Fitzgerald nor Richard Wilbur is represented. Also among the notable missing: William Ellery Leonard, Jethro Bithell, Ludwig Lewisohn, Aldous Huxley, Dudley Fitts, John Hollander, Robert Fagles, Edmund Keeley, Kimon Friar, John Updike. Everyone will have his own list. But what an anthology this could have been!

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

# Novel Discomforts and Delights

THIS BATCH OF AMERICAN NOVELS is full of enough good and entertaining work to justify its covering the top of one's piano and taking up valuable hours of non-novelists like your reviewer. "Honorable" is the unpatronizing word which characterizes a number of them; "professional" and "scrupulous" are adjectives appropriate to their composition; "limited" and "academic" are words describing the audience for most of them, and usually their authors write with a pretty good idea of the sort of reader they are likely to have. None of these words however apply to John Irving's recent bid for more fame and fortune.[1] For those who may have forgotten, let it be remembered that Mr. Irving once wrote a good novel, *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974), which managed to be realism, romance, and a comedy that turns sour, all at once. It was not surprising then that this book did poorly on the market (his first two novels were post-Vonnegut "zany" fantasies) and that on its basis no one could have predicted what would happen when Irving wrote *The World According to Garp.* That book had some real storytelling moments, though not enough of them to make one forget its title. (Imagine calling your hero by the coy name for what fraternity boys did in the 1950s after too many whiskey sours or seabreezes!) Then there was the gratuitous violence, the dirty talk, "hilarious" incidents like Garp's biting off the ear of the dog that bit him (ho, ho), and an all-too-adolescent (in the fifties called sophomoric) attitude toward things generally. Well and good, a best seller, T-shirts emblazoned with the embarrassing word.

As a guardian of minority culture against mass civilization and novelists who allow themselves to exploit it, I was accordingly predisposed against *The Hotel New Hampshire*, whose fishy title promised more high jinks. Our local bookstore prepared us for the event by removing all other books from its window, draping the new Irving over and around everything, and putting it "on sale" to boot. In one of the copies I picked up I noted that a sizeable portion of its contents had been sewn in upside down, testimony doubtless to Dutton's enthusiasm over the whole affair. Still, nothing prepared me adequately for the really dreadful experience of sitting down and reading it, page after silly page. There is first an expression of indebtedness to various books on Vienna, or by Freud. There is thanks to Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in the Dover Guide and

[1] THE HOTEL NEW HAMPSHIRE, by *John Irving*. Dutton. $15.50.

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Libretto Series (introduced and translated by Ellen Bleiler). There are special thanks given to Donald Justice (more of him later) and the Sonoma Rape Crisis Center of Santa Rosa, California. Finally, there is the copyright by none other than "Garp Enterprises, Ltd." After such credits, what forgiveness? Surely this will be no ordinary novel, and indeed it is scarcely a novel at all. Its opening chapter features a bear called "State O'Maine," purchased by the narrator's father and renamed "Earl" in honor of the noise he makes. Earl is eventually shot (none too soon for this reader's taste), father weeps, and we are launched into a predictably wacky-but-wonderful (Irving would have us feel) train of events. The narrator has a terrific sister named Franny (note Salingeresque tones, in fact the whole Berry family is a crude recreation of the Glass bunch) who is good at protecting her brother from tough football players like Ralph DeMeo: " 'Jesus!' he said, in a soft little voice. Franny had grabbed the tin cup in his jock strap and twisted its edges into his private parts, which is what we called them in those days." Later in the chapter another footballer named Poindexter who has gone into the woods to move his bowels, "crapped messily on the insides of his football shoes and had to wipe the shoes as well as his ass." In the line of crap there is also the Berrys' dog, Sorrow (note significant name) who has halitosis, farts a lot, and is, after a discussion, put out of his smelly misery, then stuffed by one of the younger Berrys, causing the narrator's grandfather—a football coach named "Iowa Bob"—to suffer a fatal heart attack when he (Sorrow, that is) falls out of a closet (stuffed) and scares the poor coach to his death. Before the dog and Iowa Bob kick off, you get crisp Irving dialogue like so:

> "I know he smells bad," Frank said, "but that's not exactly a fatal disease."
>
> "In a hotel it is," Father said. "That dog has terminal flatulence."
>
> "And he *is* old," Mother said.
>
> "When *you* get old," I told Mother and Father, "we won't put you to sleep."
>
> "And what about *me*?" Iowa Bob said. "I suppose I'm the next one to go. Got to watch my farting, or it's off to the nursing home."

No, what about *me*, moaned this reader, desperately thinking of all the good things he could be doing, like playing a record, having a sandwich, watching Bob Newhart reruns, or reading some other novel. But I kept on, through the swell rape of Franny, through the great scene where Bitty "Titsie" Tuck is inserting her diaphragm when she sees the dog Sorrow (he keeps showing up) drowned in the bathtub, through the appearance (we are now in Vienna, I understand) of Susie, a rape-crisis expert (thanks to the Sonoma Cen-

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ter) who dresses up in a bear suit, is called "Susie the Bear," and seduces Franny in a hot sex scene. I became confused here, thinking that Susie really *was* a bear; but I'm not sure it makes a significant difference. Later in the book Donald Justice, an old Iowa Workshop buddy of Irving's, comes in quite a bit in case we're tired of Susie the Bear. There is also what passes for "thought" in Irving, some talk about dreams and how life, how *everything* my dear (even successors to *Garp*) are fairy tales. The truly awful thing about this teenage monstrosity is that there's not a laugh in it, though many yucks. While underneath it all shines through the healthy though pessimistic American boy with a heart of gold, ready for a spot of wrestling. As James Atlas said in his *Times* review, John Irving really wants to be liked, and we'd better like him if we know what's good for us. But, like Atlas, I refuse to be wrestled into such dutiful submission: *The Hotel New Hampshire* is one of the worst books ever.

Watch out for novels with Hotel in the title, I thought, as I finally got around to that other bestseller of 1981.[2] D. M. Thomas' book shares as well with Irving's the presence of "Freud" as a character, this time however the Real Viennese McCoy back there in 1920 working on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and offering for the inspection of a colleague (and the reader) two pieces of writing—one in verse, the other in prose—of a young woman patient, suffering from severe hysteria, whose writings show "an extreme of libidinous phantasy combined with an extreme of morbidity." This combination suggests to Freud that he may be right in positing a "death instinct" which is as strong as the libidinous one. Or so goes the doctor's attempt to deal with the case of "Anna G." whose writing takes up the first third of the book. Mr. Thomas, himself a skillful translator of Anna Akhmatova, has contrived a free flowing pentameter, often rhymed but irregularly so, to convey the dreamlike sequence of libidinous violence:

> we heard some waiters running and some guests
> but your son kept his hand upon my breast
> then plunged his mouth to it, the nipple swelled,
> there were shouts and there were crashes in the hotel
> we thought we were in a liner out to sea
> a white liner, he kept sucking sucking me,
> I wanted to cry, my nipples were so drawn
> out by his lips, and tender, your son moved on
> from one nipple to another, both were swollen
> I think some windowpanes were broken
> then he rammed in again you can't conceive
> how pure the stars are, large as maple leaves

[2] THE WHITE HOTEL, by *D. M. Thomas*. Viking. $12.95.

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The prose passage is longer, but basically more of the same, which after eighty-six pages I found humorlessly wearying, and not very erotic. Then Freud proceeds to analyze Anna G.'s case in the expected way, uncovering various deceptions and substitutions and proposing that the "white hotel" is the body of the mother, "the oceanic oneness of the child's first years, the auto-erotic paradise, the map of our first country of love," identification with which precedes the Oedipus complex. Incestual and homosexual components are, not surprisingly, also uncovered in studying Frau Anna's childhood and family. Finally she is pronounced cured and goes off to assume a "normal" life as a talented opera singer.

This is skillfully done, as is even more so the next section, an anonymous third person narrative account, ten years and more later, of Lisa Erdmann's (the real "Frau Anna") meeting in Milan (she has been called to sing a role in *Eugen Onegin*) and later marriage with a Russian Jew whose first wife dies. The section concludes in 1936, then picks up again when Lisa and her stepson (the husband has been sent to Siberia) are massacred by the Germans at Babi Yar, in the Ukraine. In a strange and not very satisfying coda, Lisa is reunited with her mother at a sort of Palestinian white hotel, and the book's last word is "happy." At one point the narrator contemplates the dead at Babi Yar: "The thirty thousand became a quarter of a million. A quarter of a million white hotels in Babi Yar," and I presume we are supposed to move from the individual psyche to the public horror and understand something about our century. But could it be that D. M. Thomas' extreme facility, his clever organization and invention within the novel, has made such understanding unlikely? There are no words (George Steiner must have said) for Babi Yar; but Thomas' language never flows more effortlessly than in describing it. Indeed the inexpressible generally presents him with no problems—his literary canniness never gives out; and one might guess that the extraordinary popularity of this novel—tens of thousands of copies sold—has something to do with its power of titillation: read all about Frau Anna getting sucked and rammed, then keep going until you shiver at the horrors of Babi Yar, but always under the safe controlling hand of the resourceful novelist. It may be puritanical to object to this sort of entertainment, but I did find it objectionable. Maybe you just can't "do" Freud, the massacre in the Ukraine, and come out richly compassionate too. Though a much superior piece of work to Irving's, I felt a similar exploitation, on an intellectually higher and eminently respectable level, of sex'n violence. When Kuznetsov wrote about Babi Yar it was a matter of bearing witness; D. M. Thomas, of Oxford and Hereford, does not quite have those credentials.

To turn to more modest undertakings.[3] *Souvenirs*, a first novel by

[3] SOUVENIRS, by *W. D. Wetherell.* Random House. $10.95. THE POLYGAMIST, by *B. H. Friedman.* Atlantic-Little, Brown. $11.95. THE TEMPTATION OF EILEEN HUGHES, by *Brian Moore.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $11.95. THE COUNTRY, by *David Plante.* Atheneum. $9.95.

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W. D. Wetherell, an attractive writer I expect to hear more from, is about a woman named Elaine, unmarried and moving beyond the zone of marital possibility, who lives with her mother in Queens (Woodhaven) and is a restorer of antiques ("We patch up the past," her motto), who takes on old candlesticks and crockery and cracked ashtrays from the 1939 World's Fair, but in a more daring operation agrees to patch up the past for Mr. and Mrs. John Powers by excising the memory of their son John—killed in Vietnam—from the fixated mother's obsession. Unbeknownst to her, Mr. Powers sends Elaine the souvenirs, letters and photographs, and she is instructed to keep most of them, sending back only those from which John can somehow be detached by this skillful restorer of the past. Elaine's mother is dippy, living in her own world of twenty years ago, and gradually both she and her daughter grow enamoured of "John" as the son-brother they never had; while Mrs. Powers is "cured" of her grieving anguish. It is really a Jamesian, Sacred-Fountish tale about the artist and her relation to "life," told with economy and executive clarity. Maybe the ending is too heavily rigged, but on the whole *Souvenirs* is a well-made and unpretentious piece of work.

Reading these various novels I couldn't help thinking back to an earlier fiction chronicle ten years ago, and the clutch of nutty "far-out" extravagances I morosely made my way through: *Eisenhower, My Eisenhower, The Death and Life of Harry Goth, Farragan's Retreat, The Bushwhacked Piano, The Dick Gibson Show*—where have they all gone? By welcome contrast the prevailing fictional mood today is quieter and greyer, a decent realism seeming preferable to manic performing tricks. B. H. Friedman's new one is a very professional exercise about the life and loves of a widower professor specializing in Islamic Studies and especially in Sir Richard Burton. Retired from Columbia, he lives among his books and files in a Riverside Drive apartment, which Friedman lovingly renders, while forming erotic attachments with his young research assistant, then with an old love of many years ago, now herself a widow. Providing a witty choral commentary on these experiences is the voice of his dead wife, who awards merits or demerits to his behavior. But the whole pleasure of *The Polygamist* lies in the telling—in Friedman's creation of a civilized, humorously open voice to convey the odd satisfactions of his hero's enterprise. A paragraph from early in the book may suggest the sense of possibility felt in both character and expectant reader:

> Perhaps Winnie's long period of mourning has ended. Saturday he sleeps later than usual, awakens with a substantial appetite, and decides to go out for breakfast, something he has not done for many months. It is an early spring day, slightly overcast and chilly, but what sunshine there is feels good on his head and what air there is, not spoiled by cars and trucks on Broadway, feels good in his lungs. Children playing stickball in side streets,

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bright fabrics displayed in clothing-store windows, the newspaper he buys on the way to the restaurant—all these, too, suggest the warmer spring to come.

For at least a moment, Morningside Heights takes on the look of life as it should be. Other things in the novel—the Islamic lore (did you know that lots of eggs raise the old potency as well as cholesterol level?), carefully accounted games of backgammon (a game which has always eluded me), food and drink generally—are equally enriched by Friedman's elegant, hospitable style. A sleeper of a book, which deserves more praise than it has gotten.

Brian Moore's thirteenth work of fiction doesn't top all his previous ones, and is less compelling than *The Doctor's Wife* of a few years ago, where sexual love, marital coldness, the sources of temptation, were also explored. *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes* is a terrible title, and indeed it's not much of a temptation, since she absolutely resists the efforts of her rich employer, an Ulster businessman named Bernard McAuley (married to a sad, promiscuous and appealing woman) to turn her into the recipient of his religio-marital-spiritual devotion. What is fine about the book, rather than the thematic peg, is its wholly authoritative presentation of the London to which rich McAuley takes Eileen for a look at the good life—smoked salmon and grilled dover sole and champagne at Overton's; taxis everywhere—as the worldly embodiment of what he proposes to give her. She rejects him, purposes to fly back to Ulster, is delayed, and after lunch at one of those terraced houses off Regent's Park bids him goodbye, only to find as she walks through the park that Bernard is hiding behind a tree, spying on her. Annoyed, excited, she runs and hides, then watches as her pursuer comes into view:

> At first, from her blinkered perspective through the bushes, the great expanse of meadow seemed empty. Then, in the distance, she saw children flying kites. Gradually, more people came into her line of vision. Among them was a runner. The runner was Bernard and she saw that he was running in the general direction she had taken. She saw him stop and look about, a small lonely figure in the great expanse of meadow and sky, the lost dog she had imagined. He came on, running again, going in the direction of the path she had taken. She realized that if he kept on his present course he would pass by her hiding place. He ran erratically but at a speed which, had he been sure of his direction, would have kept him at her heels. As he came closer, he slowed and looked around, searching for her. She saw his face. She had never seen him like this. His face was the face of a man distraught as with some awful news.

At a moment like this, the rather toneless, unflashy writing is ab-

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solutely perfect for opening up vistas of embarrassment, pity, terror. As with other work by Brian Moore, one forgets that there is a writer here—we are just reading *things*, *situations*. So when Joyce Carol Oates, in the *New York Times Book Review* (August 2, 1981), speaks of this novel as "sketchy, anemic and hurried" and as a story told in a "perfunctory" manner, I really don't know what she's talking about (and should Oates use a word like "hurried" about anyone else's narrative, considering some of her own?). At any rate, *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes* is worth the attention of anybody who cares about realism.

I note that a number of reviewers of David Plante's short successor to *The Family* have testified to how moving they found it, and I felt rather cold and ungrateful for not having found it so, also puzzled as to why that was the case. The best I can do is suggest that Plante's solemnity about the narrator, his many brothers who gather with him on separate occasions at the house of their aged parents, doesn't find adequate resonance in the language composing these occasions. To call the prose "spare" would be an overstatement, as would it be to call the action "minimal." Most of the time the narrator is embracing or being wordlessly embraced by, one of his brothers. There is more solemn kissing and mute touching in this novel (all that French solidarity, and in Providence, R.I.) than has been seen ever within a 159-page compass. The main words are "I said," "No," "Yes," and the upshot of it all is reader claustrophobia, more severely felt here than in *The Family* which at least got itself out of the living room now and then. Perhaps the most expressive moment in *The Country* occurs when, the father having died, our narrator muses on how death is the end of everything:

> There was so little the Lord could do. His heart, too, bled. He saw, he saw the whole of the past, the present, the future, and he did nothing to alter what he saw, but wept for what he saw. It was not God's fault, and it was not our fault, our condemnation; that was the way it was, because we were born condemned, most of us anyway, though we were, ourselves, innocent. We suffered as innocents. No one was to blame, not even God. It was all so vast. It was vast and it did not allow much pity, and no consolation.

One hears the Hemingway or Gertrude Stein stutter behind this. Its "ideas" don't seem to me of much interest, and I wondered how the narrator or his creator knew about how it wasn't God's fault and how God was weeping. I don't think the altogether satisfactory answer to that is Catholicism. Plante's realism feels a bit artificial, as if the writer is working too hard to be honest and true, some mute inglorious Milton hanging around the Rhode Island terrain. But my disinclination for this manner of writing may be temperamental, and at least nobody would confuse it with John Irving.

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The extremes of contemporary American fiction are neatly illustrated by two books which have absolutely nothing in common except that they need detain no reviewer for very long.[4] Rita Kashner, a writer of filmstrips, has now produced a novel as easy to read as a made-for-TV film. There is Beth, the mom, a conscientious housewife (remember the word?) who needs some space so she can pursue her possible career as a singer, or at least as a lover of Gideon (yes, that's the chap's name). Beth has two lively and difficult, but lovable, children who make lots of demands on her; she is also married to one of those zombies who pass for a husband and resemble Richard Benjamin's man-you-love-to-hate figure in the movie *Diary of a Mad Housewife*. (The hubby in this novel is also named Richard and says the equivalent of Benjamin's "How about a little roll in the hay" when starting on passionate stuff.) There are, alas, diversions along the way to freedom:

> It was 10:45. I stripped down and got into the hot shower. Because I'm grubby, I thought—not to go to bed. I ran the water very hot and used a lot of soap. I was thinking I'd get busy on the table arrangements for the luncheon and was planning them in my head when it happened. I was soaping my breasts and they were so tender. I jerked my hand away. Then, cautiously, I touched one again. Checking. A little tender, no lump. The other. More tender . . . and there was something.

You don't have to guess what, and any person of sixth grade literacy may read and understand. Later there is an abortion too, but this is 1981 and instead of the housewife joining a support group, her husband—the abominable Richard—drops dead of a heart attack, wouldn't you know, thus clearing the decks for Beth and Gideon. All very unlike Joseph Conrad. As are Gilbert Sorrentino's pages, which pretend to have characters named "Professor Kooba," "the Arab," "Big Mickey," "Pepper," and a host of others. In fact there are no characters, nor is there a narrative, since like Sorrentino's other works it's all one voice, the performing antic voice of someone we might call "Gil." In one book, *Imaginary Qualities of Actual Things* (1971), that voice was truly a comic one, full of marvelous lists and inventive capers—as it was at times in the more recent, overblown *Mulligan Stew*. But this new book is a real dud, not a laugh in 300 pages, and a far-out throwback to the manner of a decade ago. "What can the odd cackle of effusion be? the Arab says, getting up to retrieve the bowl of pretzels." Why nothing more than the author of *Aberration of Starlight* (Sorrentino's last novel) committing an aberration of talent.

To speak of "realism" is of course to open a can of worms, since

[4] BED REST, by *Rita Kashner*. Macmillan. $10.95. CRYSTAL VISION, by *Gilbert Sorrentino*. North Point Press. $14.50.

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one person's reality is another's fantasy. For example, Bag Ladies have been "in" as a literary subject ever since Elizabeth Hardwick asked someone to have mercy on them (in *Sleepless Nights*). Now Alix Kates Schulman, who has done the feminist saga in two earlier novels, pokes her nose into midtown 42nd Street-Eighth Avenue life, and comes up with a bag-lady heroine, "Owl," whose daily goings on are given us in excruciating particularity.[5] Owl falls in with Robin, a runaway from Maine who has become a prostitute (a "ho") whose pimp is named Prince. Alix Schulman brings them all together with a vengeance; the novel (one might say) is perfectly constructed, everything dovetails, and there is the requisite amount of gritty street-and-sex life. (Did you know, for example, that New York City cops mustn't remove their pants, in the course of entrapping a "ho," even to make an arrest? Did you know that if you're a wise woman you will beware of a customer with a pacemaker, since the "trick" may die on you?) Yet nothing touches the heart, the whole of it feels contrived so as to make up a "moving" tale (and so well researched too) about the underside of things. In a curious way, it's like Babi Yar in *The White Hotel;* something terrible happens, but the language of the narrative never suggests any difficulty in expressing it. How neatly the sentences, paragraphs and chapters fall together, encountering no resistance. This is I think what is meant by using the word "slick" to describe the feel of a book.

One of the ways to avoid slickness is not to grease your narrative machinery too assiduously, and thus encourage a reader to pay attention to something besides the ostensible "action" of the tale. Consider the instances of novels by Monroe Engel and Cynthia Seton.[6] *Fish* has blurbs from Saul Bellow and Frank Kermode, each of which draws attention to Mr. Engel's writing—Kermode even nervously allowing as how the novel is "almost *too* well written." "Too well" means that Engel's narrative is always willing to open itself up to the casual, the exploratory, the digressive, the seemingly unpremeditated modulation from one key into another. *Fish* might not seem to have much going for it: a rather passive "I" narrator who often engages in what he calls "vagueing," and who early in the novel as often, takes a walk into Harvard Square. After an astute sociological-geographical analysis of the Square, comparisons made with Los Angeles, Mexico City and Dakar, as well as with other Cambridge Squares—Central and Inman and Kendall—he moves from outer city to an inner one, in an effort to say what he thinks he's up to:

> I head for the Square evenings when the weather is favorable and I have nothing better to do, to stop vagueing—or, preferably,

[5] ON THE STROLL, by *Alix Kates Schulman.* Knopf. $12.95.

[6] FISH, by *Monroe Engel.* Atheneum. $12.95. A PRIVATE LIFE, by *Cynthia Seton.* W. W. Norton. $10.95.

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> to forestall it. By now, these chronic, accelerated slippages of attention from which you start with only a schematic notion—an outline deprived of detail—of what's been going on for the past ten, twenty, or thirty minutes scare the bejesus out of me. They aren't painful exactly, but I know that some kinds of internal hemorrhage are painless too and issue no warning until the bleeder discovers that what he thought was a bass drum thumping outside his window is actually his heart making do as it can with decreasing working supplies . . . Vagueing is also a symptom of deficiency, of the failure of the environment to provide circumstances to keep the registering instrument occupied, or of the instrument to register, and I actually thought I heard something like a drumbeat or tattoo just before I hit the Norway maple alongside the Connecticut Turnpike in June, although impact and sound could also have been concurrent.

On it develops, through memories of draftee amphibious training in Virginia, to riding the Dragon Loop at the Miramar amusement park, to the accident again, back to the Square where some Japanese businessmen in permanent-press suits are looking into the Reliable Camera Shop: "Each has at least one camera and one camera case slung separately over his neck and several have second cameras or accessories as well, and they're comparing the cameras they're bearing with the cameras in the store window most of which are also Japanese." This is a humorous observation, but the tone remains even, unexcited by its own wit. The passage is a typical bit of narrative procedure in this novel, which means that the unemphatic, even relatively uninteresting characters exist more to trigger the "I's" reflections, than for their own sakes. Whether it's shingling a roof or making love, there is always a haze of perceptions between us and any "action"—which can be frustrating, but is in fact the admirable thing about this quiet and assured book.

Over the past six years, Cynthia Seton has produced three deftly-written novels about men and women—and children—in very much the contemporary world of ideas and assumptions about marital fidelity, feminism, "finding" oneself, and all those other important and sometimes boring issues. But in *A Fine Romance* (1976), in *A Glorious Third* (1979), and now in *A Private Life*, she refuses ever to be boring about them, since everything is invariably touched by her wit and made thereby lively, alive. The two earlier novels focussed on a husband, then a wife, confronted among other things by sexual temptation and meeting it in separate ways, though interestingly enough each time in Europe. Although Mrs. Seton is perfectly at home in writing about America, her characters have the leisure and the desire to go to Europe where they play out their not-so-passionate scene. The new novel focuses on a daughter, M.-E.F. ("Fanny") Foote, who gets sent by a glossy magazine to do a piece on her aunt,

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the "private life" of the book's title, who abruptly left an academic career some years back and settled in southern France with her female friend, Lutécie. The magazine's editors smell a lesbian possibility and pay Fanny's way over there so she can get the goods on Aunt Carrie, emancipated before her time. But Fanny has other ideas, and anyway things are not at all what they may have seemed to be.

Like Mr. Engel's narrator, but to a fuller, much more comic extent, Cynthia Seton's is very much concerned with ideas and with trying to see things as they are. Yet both these activities are impossible for her (though not always for her characters) unless they are seen ironically. So the book's opening paragraph takes us to the top of the Pompidou museum in Paris "through the maze of brisk businesslike rooms whose walls were filled with high-colored, rage-filled Berlin paintings—Grosz, Kokoschka, Köllwitz, Beckmann—Germans indicting Germans, very gratifying." It's those last two words which do the trick, alerting us that not to pay attention to nuance, but read for "story" rather, is to miss the whole tone and distinctive pleasure of the book. A strong, funny narrator is very much in evidence as she describes Fanny's parents' top floor Beacon Hill apartment, with a kitchen window through which a bit of the Charles can be seen: "It was a grand sight, the only view in the house. Fortunately both parents had a consuming interest in food and were in a position to look out of this window a lot." The bland expressions "were in a position to," the homely "a lot," pretend not to know what a good joke they're making. And a serious reflection about how in marriage two people are no longer intimidated by the outside world, ends up like this: "The endurance of a union becomes almost entirely an internal matter and depends upon the fierce sort of *will* Gordon Liddy has—says he has." Gordon Liddy's turning up here is fine enough, but the sly "says he has" makes it even better. Even near the end of the book, when Fanny discovers that her aunt's love affair was heterosexual after all and she feels both relieved, yet distressed that it mattered enough to make her feel relieved, we are given this comment: "Vaguely she hoped she would have risen above her smaller self, and in the meantime there was no need to bother." In the midst of so much satisfactory writing, it mattered less that (for me at least) the dénouement in Europe is less than inevitable, even somewhat diffuse in its presentation. This may have to do with the fact that, like Howells, Mrs. Seton looks on her own stories without solemnity, and is therefore wary of bringing things together in rousing good ways. Subtlety is the mode, and surprise is usually the result. She should be read.

The first novel of Thomas Savage's I encountered was *Trust in Chariots*, published (can it be?) over two decades ago; while the one of his I remember most vividly is *The Power of the Dog* (1968). Mr. Savage is like Wright Morris—I should think they might find each

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other's work congenial—in his American range—from Montana to Iowa to New England—and in his focus on small-town, domestic life where people get into trouble of one sort or another, often involving alcohol or sex (*The Power of the Dog* was particularly devastating in its sympathetic portrayal of a lonely alcoholic wife on a ranch in the far West). Since then I've more or less kept up with the five intervening books, but read the new one more carefully, judging it to be the best work he's done in fifteen years.[7] It is narrated by a fairly colorless New England small college academic, on the fringes of tenure, the single great thing in whose life is his relationship with Elizabeth "Liz" Chandler. Her life—from its inception in Bozemań, Montana, then in New Hoosic, Iowa, after the death of her father, then in New York as the wife of an embarrassingly frail reed named Hal, finally as a novelist of some gift who falls prey to the bottle—is told through her own voice, artfully interspersed with the narrator's reflections on hers, and with his own, minor, story. But the voice of Thomas Savage is clearly heard, and always a pleasure to listen to in its chastening truth-telling:

> It was not then thought appropriate for instructors to associate socially with students; under condoning lights in hall, bedroom or bar, hair is likely to be let down and feet of clay exposed. It is wise to let the young believe for as long as possible that the years bring wisdom; later they may understand that what years bring is resignation; failing powers and last words. Instructors have set atrocious examples in appearing to condone the life style of young people.

But there is no resignation, and surely no failing powers, in Savage's storytelling energies. The "western" sections of the novel are, as usual, done with much penetration and humorous observation of manners; and, as a novelist of manners generally Savage is excellent, as at ease with "doing" a moment in 1936 or 1948 (he himself is approaching age seventy) as from more recent times. The book's strategy of telling the story of an interesting person through a filter who professes not to be very interesting, is of course familiar to readers of Ford or Scott Fitzgerald. And the good thing about Savage's old-fashionedness as a novelist, is that he writes as if Conrad and Ford, and those other technique-conscious tellers from early in this century, still mattered. Early in the book he brought me back to something I hadn't thought about since my own childhood—one of those glass globes given to children at Christmas:

> . . . and as mementos of Christmas they were appropriate; shaking them caused flat, white particles to swirl in a clear liquid: you

[7] HER SIDE OF IT, by *Thomas Savage*. Little, Brown and Co. $12.95.

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held a tiny blizzard in your hand. At last the particles settled back to the little earth around a house or a snowman or a bundled-up figure in a sleigh.

When the particles settle in a novel by Savage, nothing revelatory has been announced; only—and that is surely enough—a figure has been seen clear, an "affair" has been rendered.

One is supposed to feel this about Frederick Busch's new novel also, since he is at least as "pure" a novelist as Thomas Savage, and since he devotes great amounts of ingenuity to making his "telling" telling.[8] With *Rounds*, his novel of two years back, I thought it worked spectacularly; *Take This Man*, when its particles had finally settled, left me feeling less than clear about just what sort of figure I'd seen. It is a novel about fathers and sons, dedicated to Mr. Busch's own father; it is ambitious in its time sequence, with four sections marked 1944, 1956, 1963, and 1980, in the last of which Tony Prioleau's son returns to Maine to visit his dying father. The toughest part of the book to move through satisfactorily is its first section, set in Nowhere, Illinois (Patoka Plains, actually) where Tony is stationed with an Army unit investigating the possibilities of television as a contribution to winning the war. He stumbles (he is perpetually stumbling) into a relation with a stranded young woman en route to visit her soldier-lover in San Diego, the fruit of which relation is a son, Gus, who comes back to find his father ten years later—Prioleau now working, somewhat ingloriously, as a TV repairman in, yes, Patoka Plains. The novel moves on to the Maine coast, explores, not entirely convincingly, a dramatic incident in parental-son alienation, then jumps to the coda-like finale of 1980. Without citing chapter and verse, and with admiration for the end of the book, my sense was that Busch, always praised as a fine technician, was sometimes writing too hard—if that's possible. Concerned with making every sentence vibrate, throw off sparks; eager to move, at the drop of a hat, into the inner life and past of secondary characters, the atmosphere occasionally seems hyped up. But readers should test this feeling against their own experience of such a capable and productive writer as Frederick Busch, one of those—like Savage or Seton—who needs to be kept up with.

Keeping up with Paul Theroux is by now one of the major pleasures of my life as a reader of contemporary fiction, and not just fiction either, since two recent travel books have alternated with the novels.[9] Theroux's early ones, up through *St. Jack*, were agreeable enough entertainments, but with *The Black House* (1974) he produced a stronger, more tensely organized narrative, continuing in that vein with the remarkable *Family Arsenal* (1976). *Picture Palace* (1978), more of a tour de force than the previous two, still came

[8] TAKE THIS MAN, by *Frederick Busch*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $11.95.
[9] THE MOSQUITO COAST, by *Paul Theroux*. Houghton Mifflin. $13.95.

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across eventually as a story of some poignancy, for all its loud joking. In fact Theroux, like Frost, is never more serious that when he is joking, and the new novel proves this once more. *The Mosquito Coast* is informed by his experience, recorded in *The Old Patagonian Express*, of traveling by train through Central America, and the novel also begins in Massachusetts, though in the asparagus fields of Hatfield (near Northampton) rather than the winter frigidities of Medford and South Station, Boston. It is told through the eyes of fourteen-year-old Charlie Fox, and is a tale of his father Allie, a tall tale in himself, a self-styled "last man" in America who sees through the awful sickness that is destroying the country he loves. Even in the aparagus fields of Hatfield, "civilization" is too close, the "gridlock" America is suffering from reveals itself as the family goes shopping in Springfield for sleeping bags and can openers, but finds everything tainted with "Nipponese video-crapola":

> Father stepped over to them [the sleeping bags]. "Not even waterproof. A lot of good they'd be in a monsoon."
>
> "They're for use in a tent situation," the man said.
>
> "What about a rain situation? Where's this thing from? The Gobi Desert, Mongolia, someplace like that?"
>
> "Hong Kong," the man said.
>
> "I wasn't far off!" Father said, twitching with satisfaction. "They do a lot of camping in Hong Kong. You can tell. Look at these stitches—they'd fall apart in two days. You'd be better off with a plain old blanket."
>
> "Blankets are in Household."
>
> "And where are *they* made—Afghanistan?"
>
> "I wouldn't know, sir."
>
> Father said, "What's wrong with this country?"
>
> "It's better than some places I could name."
>
> "And a damn sight worse than some others," Father said. "We could make this stuff in Chicopee and have full employment. Why don't we? I don't like the idea of us forcing skinny Oriental kids to make junk for us."
>
> "No one is being forced," the man said.
>
> "Ever been to South Korea?"

This will do as an example of the funny, beautifully paced dialogue, suggesting by contrast how far such a combination of extravagance and subtlety is beyond the reach of a John Irving, whose novel in its family-son-father apparatus might superficially, just for a moment, resemble Theroux's.

Allie Fox is an inventor, particularly of ice-houses (called things in the novel like worm tubs and fat boys), but also, in the American grain, of a world elsewhere, which world he locates in the wilds of Honduras and thereupon sets forth with his family to make it some-

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where else than in Massachusetts. Fortunately Theroux's inventiveness is a match for his hero's, and the novel ingeniously sustains itself as adventure, as travel, as comedy of various odd manners, best of all as excellent descriptive prose, able to make forcefully real various matters of physics, or flora, or carpentry, or geography. What happens, gradually and painfully over the course of the book, is an old story, the monomaniacal disintegration of the father, seen through the regretful and angry eyes of the son. As with *The Great Railway Bazaar*, when rolling home through Siberia Theroux-the-traveler realized it wasn't fun anymore, this adventure story turns both sad and scary, the tone deepening into one of elegiac terror. The end of Father is truly shocking. One can't help thinking of Mr. Kurtz, but in fact Allie Fox is a rather more interesting figure than that shadowy creation of Marlow's imagination and Conrad's strange sentences. I have not begun to suggest the many rewards of this most engaging novel, in no ways a repeat of anything Paul Theroux has done before.

Along with Theroux, Robert Stone seems to me the other, absolutely original American novelist in the early-middle forties age group (Updike is almost fifty, and Pynchon doesn't count). While not as prolific as Theroux, Stone has now written a bigger book, one that in its range of characters and interactive plottings (though not in narrative experimentation) rivals Conrad's *Nostromo*.[10] But, as always with Stone, it's a good deal more fun to read. This "fun" consists, oddly enough, in watching his usual assortment of creeps, heads, seedy police and bureaucratic small-timers, other losers and absolutely whacked-out-of-their skulls gentlemen (and a couple of ladies), being put through their paces in the exquisite torture-chamber of a Stone plot. You know that everybody is absolutely sure to come to grief; you know nobody is ever going to be allowed to take time out or a breath of air free from the demands of their creator's novelistic needs. The most brilliant creation of *A Flag for Sunrise*, a speed-freak named Pablo Tabor, inaugurates his story in a horrible sequence where he shoots his dogs ("His mind's eye started flashing him shit—death's-heads, swastikas, the ace of Spades. Dumbness. Dime-store badness"), then walks out on wife and child, though not before scaring Mrs. Tabor half to death with piles of raw hamburger:

> With the gun in his right hand, he gathered up as many of the hamburgers as he could manage with his left and went to the bedroom.
>
> "Meat trip," he said.
>
> She had the blue curtains drawn against the morning light. The covers were pulled up over her ears; in the space between

[10] A FLAG FOR SUNRISE, by *Robert Stone*. Knopf. $13.95.

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her pillow and the wall were a rolled magazine and a spilled ashtray that had fouled the sheet with butts. Tabor moved around her bed, delicately setting hamburger patties at neat intervals along the edge.

"Kathy," he called softly.

She stirred.

"I killed the dogs," he said.

Stone's weirdness is perfectly illustrated by the whole scene; we are embarrassed, perhaps disgusted (at Pablo? at the writer? at ourselves for following such antics with fascination?) but also in some quite original way entertained. Imagine not only setting out the patties, but "delicately" setting them out "at neat intervals," and imagine prefacing the whole game with those two words: "Meat trip." Only a speed freak with a clever writer behind him could be so inventive.

Robert Stone is, in fact, a fine storyteller, and much of the book's satisfactoriness can be laid to the skill with which he makes us care about what happens next: to Pablo Tabor who signs on board a shrimp boat running ammunition to the rebels in Tecan, Central America; to Sister Justin, living out the last days of a Devotionist mission, desperate to commit herself to something real, and therefore susceptible to the idealism of insurrection; to Frank Holliwell, the book's central figure, an anthropologist (or so we are told, though he's hard to believe in those terms) whose marriage has gone flat, who drinks hard, goes deep sea diving, and—in a magnificently written scene—has a vision of life under the surface. Stone gives this last character a fair quantity of eloquence, as when Holliwell thinks back to a time in Saigon when he smoked opium with an American officer who accused him of being a loser (I was reminded of both *The Hustler* and of *The Third Man*—Holliwell, like Greene's Holley Martins, gives a disastrous lecture at one point). How, muses Holliwell, can people be "positive thinkers," the world being as it is?

> How could they? he wondered. How could they convince themselves that in this whirling tidal pool of existence, providence was sending them a message? Seeing visions, hearing voices, their eyes awash in their own juice—living on their own and borrowed hallucinations, banners, songs, kiddie art posters, phantom worship. The lines of bayonets, the marching rhythms, incense or torches, chanting flights of doves—it was hypnosis. And *they* were the vampires. The world paid in blood for their articulate delusions, but it was all right because for awhile they felt better. And presently they could put their consciences on automatic.

Vietnam is behind this, but so are Conrad and George Eliot, and

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the various articulate delusions which precipitate the plot of *A Flag for Sunrise*, did so just as relentlessly for *Nostromo* and for *Middlemarch*. In his broad canvas, and in his fine ability (as in *Dog Soldiers*) to take things apart and show how they work (a gun-running boat, a trip to the bottom of the sea, the inside of a psycho's head), Stone deserves comparison with such earlier masters. There is a wonderful blackly comic scene near the end of the novel, when Pablo stumbles across the path of a crazed Mennonite child-killer named Weitling, and, by contrast, thinks of himself as just an ordinary guy: "I don't know who you people are," Pablo said despairingly, "but you are all crazy . . . I got no business in this freak show." He has himself just murdered three people.

One could bring up some reservations: both Holliwell and Sister Justin are given literary sensibilities, and sometimes a dialogue which is just too classy, too ready to offer itself up for admiration, as when he takes her to dinner and the quality of the beer is commented on (she, amazing nun, has used the phrase "horse piss" to describe it):

> "You certainly don't have the manner of a nun, do you?"
> "Horse piss is in Shakespeare," she said. "In *The Tempest*." And then she suddenly felt sad.
> Holliwell felt that she would be easier to deal with that way, although she had broken his heart with horse piss in *The Tempest*.

Really? In some of his Hemingwayesque life-is-meaningless-but-we'll-live-it-and-only-occasionally-weep moods, Stone is prey to a corresponding sentimentality (I know, Holliwell is a *character*, but . . . ). And there is still, at least for me, the problem of caring—at any level deeper than the richly executed surface of the writing—about these assorted losers, brutes and knavish plotters. But the writing is so alive (I have not begun to suggest how funny a book it is, unlike Conrad) that, as with Holliwell's positive thinkers, we put our consciences on automatic and become pure readers, interested in nothing more than the story itself. *A Flag for Sunrise* is a very impressive piece of work, the best novel Stone has yet written, and I leave him to fight it out with Updike (*Rabbit is Rich*) for the Book Award for 1981. They both deserve it.

P.S. After you emerge, still breathing and unbowed, from the ordeals of Robert Stone, you owe yourself a change of pace, so put aside a couple of evenings and engage to read through Evan S. Connell's *Mrs. Bridge* and *Mr. Bridge*, published respectively in 1959 and 1969, and now reissued in a handsome continental-type paperback edition by North Point Press.[11] There is nothing quite like

[11] MRS. BRIDGE, by *Evan S. Connell*. MR. BRIDGE, by *Evan S. Connell*. North Point Press. Boxed set (cloth): $27.50; separately (paper): $7.50 each.

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these books in our literature; undervalued and unknown to many, those who read them will reread them. I had always thought *Mr. Bridge* slightly inferior to its predecessor, but though it is perhaps too long and not quite as firmly focussed on its hero as was *Mrs. Bridge,* it is still admirable. The books complement each other, and with their blend of ironic comedy, sadness, gravity, and pathos, held always in the delicate suspension of Connell's assured prose, they provide complex kinds of satisfactions, just one of which I will close with here—with the Bridges, husband, wife and their three children, sitting on the porch one evening back there long ago in Kansas City in the 1930s and listening to the locusts sing. Mr. Bridge has taken time out from reading his evening paper to explain to one of his daughters how (as he recalls it from school) the locust produces its music, and as always his explanation is formal, rather pedantic, his manner chilly, though it tries not to be so. When one daughter notes that the insects begin to sing in unison and asks him how that is done, he answers that it is a mystery. The chapter concludes as follows:

> "It's so beautiful," Ruth said. "It's like they had an orchestra with a conductor. I could lie here and listen forever."
>
> Mrs. Bridge said, "They always let us know evening is on the way."
>
> "It sure is funny you never see them," Carolyn said. "I looked, only I couldn't find any."
>
> A few minutes later Mrs. Bridge remarked, "Don't you wonder how many there might be in that old elm? Suppose we guess."
>
> Mr. Bridge discovered that he could not read any more, though he continued holding the paper. He listened to his daughters and his wife and he observed his son, but he no longer understood what was being said; as he listened to their voices and to the seasonal music of the insects the problems which had troubled him during the day did not seem important, and he reflected that he had practically everything he ever wanted.

Now that I think of it, give Evan Connell the Book Award.

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***Notes on Contributors*** ***(continued from page 129)***

*Geography of the Imagination* and *Eclogues* (both North Point Press). This spring Johns Hopkins is re-issuing his first book of stories, *Tatlin!*.

G. E. MURRAY is poetry columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. His most recent collection of poems, *Repairs*, published by University of Missouri Press, won the Devins Award for poetry in 1979.

Currently, RICHMOND LATTIMORE is completing his translations of *Acts and Epistles* for Farrar Straus & Giroux.

*Asterisk indicates a new contributor.*

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